



***Warm words or real change? Examining the evolution of Conservative  
Party social policy since 1997***

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## Abstract

This thesis seeks to address to what extent the Conservative Party has re-ignited its interest in the broad sphere of social policy since 1997, which some political commentators believe the party neglected following the demise of the ‘years of consensus’ from the mid-1970s onwards. Having experienced one of its worst ever general election defeats in 1997, the Conservative Party spent an unfamiliar thirteen years in opposition, providing an original context to this study. During its sustained exile from national office until 2010, the party reviewed the perception of its primarily economic policy agenda, and it has subsequently revised its position on various social issues from the late 1990s onwards.

Following the introduction, the first four chapters provide a broad theoretical framework to the overall academic study that identifies the key ideas, theories and ideological traditions that have shaped and influenced Conservative Party policy-making since the emergence of mass democracy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Links are subsequently made with key policies and attitudes that have been associated with the Conservatives while in office throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The three further chapters are more policy-orientated and seek to link such ideas and ideological influences with practical policy-making while in power, with specific contemporary areas of social policy highlighted as case studies. Chapters five to seven subsequently highlight some notable social policy initiatives that the post-2010 Conservative-led government has developed in opposition and pursued in power, The Big Society, The Free Schools programme and the reform of the NHS, and they are framed within the context of David Cameron’s depiction of the ‘broken society’. Each chapter offers a rigorous concluding judgment relating to just how much ‘change’ the modern Conservative Party appears to have initiated within this particular policy sphere.

In chronological terms, the thesis addresses the social policy-making agendas of recent governments in order to make comparative analysis. The administrations led by Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, dating consecutively from 1979, alongside the David Cameron-led coalition from 2010, are therefore the key periods of modern government focused upon. However, as the thesis title suggests, specific attention

is given to the evolution of Conservative Party social policy development from 1997 onwards.

Having made the link between ideas, ideology and theory to practical contemporary policy developments over seven rigorously constructed chapters, an attempt to reach a measured judgment is then provided. The central question of the thesis and the initial issues raised within the introductory chapter are again focused on, and the extent to which the Conservative Party has changed within this particular policy area is explicitly addressed throughout the concluding section, as well as the various social, political and electoral dimensions that emerge in the process of constructing such a conclusion.

## Contents

<b>Title and summary of Chapters.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction and Methodology .....</b>	<b>2-18</b>
 <b>CHAPTER 1</b>	
The significance of Ideology within the Conservative Party and its influence on social policy-making....	19
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	
The impact of the 'New Right' on the Conservative Party's social policy agenda.....	44
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	
Modern Conservatism and Social Justice in Theory .....	80
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	
Modern Conservatism and Social Justice in Practice.....	108
<b>CHAPTER 5</b>	
The Big Society.....	133
<b>CHAPTER 6</b>	
Social Policy Case Studies: Addressing the 'broken society' and promoting greater social justice: (1)- The 'Free Schools' Policy.....	163
<b>CHAPTER 7</b>	
Social Policy Case Studies: Addressing the 'broken society' and promoting greater social justice: (2)- Reform of the NHS .....	196
 <b>Conclusion</b>	
The nature and evolution of Modern Conservative social policy .....	233
 <b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>258</b>

# List of Tables and Figures

Chapter 4, p.123-25, Table 1- Public Spending in UK as a Percentage of GDP (1975-2012)

Chapter 4, p.127-28, Table 2- Government spending by billions (2011 estimates)

Chapter 4, p.128, Table 3- Government spending by key social policy areas as a percentage of GDP (2011 estimates)

Chapter 7, p.202, Table 1- Public spending on health as a percentage of GDP in England (1993-2009)

Chapter 7, p.231, Diagram One- Previous NHS Structure (pre-2010)

Chapter 7, p.232, Diagram Two- David Cameron's New NHS Bureaucracy after 2010

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Ben Williams, April 2013

*Warm words or real change? Examining the evolution of Conservative Party social policy since 1997.*

**Chapter Outlines:**

- **Introduction and Methodology**
  
- 1. The significance of Ideology within the Conservative Party and its influence on social policy-making**
  
- 2. The Impact of the 'New Right' on the Conservative Party's social policy agenda**
  
- 3. Modern Conservatism and Social Justice in Theory**
  
- 4. Modern Conservatism and Social Justice in Practice**
  
- 5. The Big Society**
  
- 6. Social Policy Case Studies- Addressing the 'broken society' and promoting greater social justice?: (1) The 'Free Schools' Policy**
  
- 7. Social Policy Case Studies- Addressing the 'broken society' and promoting greater social justice?: (2) Reform of the NHS**
  
- 8. Conclusion**

## Introduction and Methodology

### Background

The Conservative Party's defeat at the 1997 General Election was a resounding political rejection on an unprecedented historical scale<sup>1</sup>, and in subsequent years the party has experienced a significant period of introspection and internal analysis in relation to the direction and evolution of its policy-making agenda and its overall ideological identity. The confident aura of the Thatcher era of the 1980s, fuelled by a successful election-winning formula inspired and moulded by free-market populism along with a sense of ideological certainty instilled by the thrusting capitalist agenda of the 'New Right', was shattered by a shifting public mood and a gradual erosion of popular support as the 1990s progressed. Such socio-political changes culminated in the drastic outcome of the 1997 general election when the 20<sup>th</sup> century's 'natural party of government' that had generally acknowledged that '*periods of opposition (were) the exception, and office the norm*'<sup>2</sup>, found its once-dominant position reduced to a state of utter political disarray, '*being reduced to a rump*' and experiencing its heaviest electoral defeat '*since the birth of mass democratic politics in 1918*'<sup>3</sup>. This watershed election result was variously described by sections of the media as a New Labour 'Triumph' (The Guardian), a 'Landslide' (Daily Telegraph) and a 'Massacre' (Daily Mail), with the general consensus being that '*it was all of these*'<sup>4</sup>.

A long-term spell in national political opposition appeared inevitable given the scale of this ejection from office, and such an electoral annihilation at the hands of a revitalised and modernised 'New Labour' juggernaut would represent the nadir of Conservative 20<sup>th</sup> century political fortunes in terms of both parliamentary seats and wider public support. Fundamental reasons for such plummeting levels of popular appeal were inherently rooted in the party's faltering and uncertain ideological vision, a diminishing public perception

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<sup>1</sup> The 165 Conservative MPs was the lowest figure for the party since 1906, cited in David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997*, (Macmillan Press, Basingstoke, 1997), Ch.13, p.244

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon, 'The Barren Years: 1997-2005', cited in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *Recovering Power: The Conservatives in Opposition Since 1867*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005), Ch.11, p.243

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Ch.11, p.247

<sup>4</sup> David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997*, (Macmillan Press, Basingstoke, 1997), Ch.13, p.244



aligned with the unappealing nature of the party's policy menu, with the image and identity of contemporary Conservatism seeming to be both damaged and eroded in the eyes of significant sections of the electorate, apparently reflecting a broader public disenchantment in relation to its long-term political agenda. Ultimately, the 1997 Conservative Party appeared too concerned with its own internal policy divisions and had grown out of touch with the views and interests of a rapidly changing and gradually more diverse British society, and this dynamic social change unerringly evolved while the Conservatives were pre-occupied with the political strains of governance, with a primary focus on the fundamental economic restructuring of the country. Consequently, the Conservative Party faced a scenario whereby:

*'After nearly two decades of Conservative rule, the needs, anxieties, priorities and aspirations of the electorate had become harder for the party to decipher and comprehend. Many simply failed to acknowledge how British society had changed in the 1990s'<sup>5</sup>.*

Therefore, despite the constant hum of such unerring background social developments, the Conservative Party of the mid-1990s largely appeared to be instilled with a sense of socio-political myopia and detachment that went to the heart of its definitive identity problems as the decade progressed. Consequently, policy-making in terms of the key social and economic spheres appeared to be increasingly disjointed and lacking in terms of a coherent connected vision prior to 1997, with the party's key focus appearing to be the short-term political survival of John Major's parlous administration from 1992 onwards, with its slender parliamentary majority of just 21 (1992-97), and by *'December 1996 the government lost its majority in Parliament altogether'*<sup>6</sup>. In this context of focusing on its own sheer political survival, the Conservative Party in office seemed to be detached from the basic demands, concerns and priorities of contemporary external society. It was therefore arguably the case that from late 1990 onwards, the Conservative political machine experienced a prolonged image and identity crisis triggered by the demise of Margaret

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon, 'The Barren Years: 1997-2005', cited in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *Recovering Power: The Conservatives in Opposition Since 1867*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005), Ch.11, p.248

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Ch.11, p.247

Thatcher and her explicit ideological emphasis. The shattering electoral defeat of 1997 therefore marked the erosive culmination of almost seven years of a post-Thatcher hangover that subsequently blighted the party's fortunes and its ability to make a coherent progression from this period of electoral and political hegemony. Such an electoral watershed ultimately also represented a turning-point, bringing such matters of identity and future policy direction to the absolute forefront of the party's political priorities, and it now faced such challenges firmly located in national political opposition on a likely long-term basis. It is within this socio-political context that this thesis is set, seeking to analyse and interpret the nature of the response of British Conservatism to this scenario, and the subsequent evolution of its key social policies and its broader social attitudes.

### **Aims and objectives of the Thesis**

This thesis has been written with the principal research aim of assessing to what extent the Conservative Party has changed in terms of its approach to social policy since 1997. Hence the title of the thesis provides the key overarching research question: *'Warm words or real change? Examining the evolution of Conservative Party social policy since 1997'*. This question needs to be unpicked further as it leads to a number of more precise research questions.

1. What is the role of ideology in the Conservative Party's policy formulation? This particular question will be addressed in chapter one.
2. What was the prevailing orthodoxy in the Conservative Party towards social and economic policy before 1997? The thesis will establish the main features of the New Right school of thought (particularly so in chapter 2).
3. What, and who, have been particularly influential in shaping Conservative Party social policy formulation since the 1990s? Here the focus will be on the work of David Willetts (Civic Conservatism), Iain Duncan Smith (social justice), Philip Blond (Red Toryism) and the broader evolution of the 'Big Society' agenda (covered in chapters 3-5 in particular).

4. How has the Conservative Party's social policy agenda developed since the formation of the Coalition Government in 2010 and what has been the impact of the Liberal Democrats on such policy development? In order to make this more manageable the thesis will focus on two key areas of reform, namely health reform and schools policy (in chapters 6 and 7), with reasons to be provided for why these two cases have been selected.

The Conservative Party has been identified for this study due to its record of unprecedented electoral success as a party of government in the modern political era, although such a record has been clouded somewhat by its relatively poor electoral performances over recent years and from the mid-1990s in particular, a development that is somewhat inconsistent with its political hegemony for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a political movement, the Conservative Party has therefore assumed a pivotal and integral position within the British political system over the course of the last century in particular, and its prominent role in the broader structure of politics has been summarised by one academic as representing '*one of the great certainties of British politics*'<sup>7</sup>, such has been its unerring presence within the higher echelons of power for the majority of the modern political era. The thesis therefore aims to identify and address how and to what extent the Conservative Party has sought to adapt its position and attitudes in relation to various key social policy issues, and why this review of its policy agenda has subsequently instilled an aura of uncertainty and insecurity about the party's long-term political prospects, to complement its existing socio-political vulnerabilities. Such an analytical approach is based on the fundamental premise that the party's established alignment in relation to broader contemporary social policy issues had created an associated negative image by the mid-1990s, and has been a contributing factor to the party's recent relative political decline. This in turn provides additional context to the party's image pertaining to social policy, as well as offering general enlightenment in explaining the nature of the broader identity and image

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Gamble, 'The Crisis of Conservatism', *New Left Review*, (No.214, November-December 1995), p.3  
<http://newleftreview.org/l/214/andrew-gamble-the-crisis-of-conservatism>

problems facing modern Conservatism, and which has created political and electoral difficulties that have been prolonged during the post-Thatcher era in particular.

Such a long-standing and dominant political role has therefore been a hallmark of the Conservative Party's prevailing image, fuelled by its longevity and durability, its political pragmatism alongside an impressive record of electoral success, particularly during the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it held national office either alone or in coalition for approximately two-thirds of this historical period. However despite such a legacy of political dominance, its electoral record in the final years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the formative years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been far from impressive, with no outright general election victory achieved since 1992, and this scenario has subsequently generated a perception that Conservatism within the modern era appears to have become primarily 'economic' as opposed to 'social' in its policy focus, and has accordingly become somewhat de-aligned with the prevailing social moods, needs and attitudes of contemporary Britain. This background provides a key context for this thesis and the core research questions identified, and a primary challenge of this academic analysis will be to see if this assumption of the Conservative Party having a primarily economic policy agenda is still a valid and accurate one in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with social policy often perceived as being neglected in the process. It is on this basis that this thesis subsequently adopts a position from the outset that the party's past record in the area of social policy between 1979 and 1997 is one important factor in explaining such poor electoral performance within the contemporary era.

In seeking to assess the various elements that have shaped and influenced the Conservative Party's evolving social-policy making agenda from approximately 1997 onwards, the thesis focuses on a policy agenda that has been at the bedrock of the party's socio-political strategy and which has been ultimately aimed at refreshing its electoral brand and widening its overall political appeal. In reviving and reinvigorating an otherwise neglected policy dimension, social policy re-formulation has represented a challenge made more difficult by the pressing economic problems and austerity agenda that the post-2010 government has had to deal with. Throughout the thesis, the analytical thrust ultimately seeks to compare the significance of social policy with that of economic policy-making, how

the two dimensions interact and whether one policy area has more electoral potency or relevance than the other.

In adopting such an approach and focus, the thesis addresses key influences that have shaped the nature and rate of change within this sphere of social policy-making, identifying those which have been of most significance and subsequently make appropriate connections with the party's recent electoral misfortune, with particular emphasis on how the contemporary Conservative Party has revised and re-formulated its focus on social policy since it lost power in 1997. The year 1997 marked the beginning of thirteen years in national political opposition following a remarkable eighteen year period in office, and this significant period of exile from government was a prolonged historical phase which was an unprecedented length of national political opposition for the self-styled 'natural party of government', and this provides a distinct and original angle to the thesis. In embarking on a process of significant introspective policy revision during its time outside government, the party has sought to revise and re-invent both its image and core principles for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Within this context, the party's modernizing tendency has sought to elaborate its own understanding of the key socially-fused concepts of community, society and social justice as part of a broader project to 'de-toxify' its public image that was somewhat polluted among parts of the electorate due to political events and policy developments between 1979 and 1997. It is therefore an important and fundamental aspect of the thesis that within its core framework, analysis is made as to whether such developments have resulted in the presentation of a distinctly new socio-political agenda for the British Conservative Party in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or alternatively whether it has led to a reversion to more traditional forms of Conservatism and associated policy-making. In summary, broad themes and influences that are identified and further assessed for their significance as factors within this overall process of social policy evolution and re-formulation are ideology, pragmatism/statecraft and the practical implications of coalition politics.

## **Structure of the Thesis**

The early chapters are primarily theoretical in nature, seeking to identify and address both the philosophical and ideological influences behind this particular sphere of policy-making, building up a theoretical framework for the thesis that also features coverage of key historical and political developments within this particular aspect of policy-making, and which subsequently form the basis for the later chapters that focus on the dynamic evolution of contemporary Conservative social policies. In fusing both theory and practical policy developments, the thesis aims to comprehensively address to what extent the social Conservatism of the modern era represents either continuity or change from the past, or whether it is a combination of both. It subsequently seeks to identify just how new and original the party's range of 'modern' social policies are. The chapters have therefore been arranged and organised in what appears to be the most logical and coherent overall structure, beginning with a theoretical basis and moving on to practical policy analysis in order to develop a fluent overall academic argument.

Within such a framework, the first chapter addresses the significance of ideology in the formation of Conservative social and welfare policy making and to what extent ideological factors have influenced this sphere of policy formulation over the party's modern political history. Having provided some socio-political context and background for the basis of the thesis, this chapter ultimately seeks to address how and why Conservatives adopt the broad policy positions that they do on such social policy matters, and ultimately assesses whether ideological factors are the key determinant on most occasions. The chapter then goes on to explore the difficulties of actually defining what an ideology is, and which in turn makes it difficult to attach a clear or definite trail of influence behind the overall policy-making process.

Following this early focus on the significance of ideology, the second chapter addresses one of the key ideological influences that have shaped modern Conservatism, namely the New Right tradition or perspective that has been an influential factor in global political developments from the mid-1970s onwards. This chapter assesses how the New Right agenda has impacted on Conservative governance and how it has sought to shape and mould the party's economic and social policies in office since 1979. Within this framework the chapter offers appropriate analysis as to how positive or negative this specific

ideological tradition has been on the Conservative Party's overall political fortunes and popularity, as well as identifying to what extent that it continues to shape and influence party policy in the contemporary era.

Having initially addressed and analysed the broader conceptual significance of ideology and how much it has moulded and influenced the development of Conservative social policy, before moving on to identify any specific influences of the New Right ideological tradition, the thesis then develops further to assess how such ideological pressures have shaped the theoretical term of 'Social Justice' and its practical meaning. This is a political term that is open to debate in what it means in both theory and practice, and it has been an area of significant ideological and theoretical debate within the modern political era, being a particular influence and dynamic behind the social policy debate within contemporary British politics. The theoretical and philosophical background and origins of the concept is discussed and assessed within chapter three, with the specific Conservative critique and objections to its traditional meaning explored and analysed in more depth. In the connected yet separate chapter four, further assessment is made of how the theory has operated on a practical and functional level within the modern political era and how this is evident in the formulation and application of contemporary Conservative Party social policies. In particular, this chapter assesses how the Conservative-led government from 2010 has sought to address and distinctly develop the social justice agenda in a practical sense, and analysis is subsequently offered regarding the nature of its social policies that have developed and been implemented as a result.

Having covered the theoretical background of such terms and concepts that have been influential in shaping the formation of social policy in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the thesis moves on to address and identify some practical and relevant policy developments that have arisen as a result of the Conservative Party being back in government after 2010. This contemporary expression of social Conservatism is initially evident with chapter five, that seeks to address, explain and analyse the concept of 'The Big Society'. It adopts a fusion of theory and policy in its focus on a socio-political term generated by David Cameron in the early phase of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as he sought to devise a new and more 'modernised' image and approach to social policy for his party. The actual meaning and practical implications of

the somewhat vaguely-worded policy is explored in more detail, along with an overview of how the policy has evolved and made an impact since the Conservatives returned to national office in 2010. There is focus on how this framework for social policy formulation has sought to develop a distinct role for the state, supplemented by a range of critiques from both the left, right and voluntarist perspectives, the latter angle a reflection of the third sector and community-level activity that is specifically and fundamentally affected by this policy. This chapter therefore serves as a 'bridge' between theory and practical policy implementation. The thesis then seeks to analyse and assess specific policy areas that have derived from this 'Big Society' agenda, namely the impact that this social policy ethos has had on key areas of public service such as education and healthcare.

The supplementary policy-based chapters therefore focus on two specific policies that have emerged within this modern political agenda, the Free Schools educational policy and the reforms to the NHS that have sought to provide a more diverse range of service providers within it. Both policies have been specifically selected for this thesis as they appear to be key spheres of social policy identified by the Conservative 'modernisers' where the party's previous record in office had some negative connotations for some key parts of the electorate, and on this basis they are policy areas that have appeared to require some specific attention and revision. These policy areas have been selected for detailed study and analysis as they have a significant electoral value in terms of the wide range of people, and specifically voters, that they impact upon. Both policy areas can therefore be viewed as high-profile mechanisms for revising and revitalising the party's own image in a more 'progressive' and 'compassionate' manner, while at the same time addressing David Cameron's observation of a 'broken society', and each can be viewed as being totemic policy examples that align with the broader principles of The Big Society socio-political agenda. Both policies therefore focus on and address two widely-used and integral aspects of social and welfare policy in the UK, and both spheres have been subject to significant reform and change since the Conservative-led coalition government came to power in 2010. In their focus on improving social mobility and addressing a revised Conservative analysis of social justice and what this concept entails, both areas of social policy covered feature a focus on improved community activity, an enhanced autonomy for local institutions and



bodies, and a greater degree of local choice as a means of ensuring the ongoing quality of public service delivery for the 21st century.

Both policy case studies can subsequently be viewed as examples of how the modern Conservative Party has been striving to make determined efforts to re-engage with the concepts of society and community, with the focus of such policies appearing to represent a clear illustration of the infusion of 'Compassionate Conservatism' within contemporary social policy debate. These two specific policies are therefore good examples of how modern Conservatism has sought to infuse its core social policy agenda with an enhanced degree of autonomy and liberation, as well as aspiring to distinguish its political image within a 're-imagined' view of the state. Such a view of the state appears to be distinct from the more explicit Thatcherite emphasis on market forces that was prevalent within British Conservatism for much of the 1980s, as it appears to acknowledge that the market does not have all of the answers to society's various challenges and problems. However, the Conservative Party's modernising faction has maintained a suspicion and hostility to an over-powerful, centralised and bureaucratic state structure that has prevailed in a repressive manner for the majority of the post-war era, and particularly so under Labour governments. The analysis within each policy-based chapter ultimately seeks to assess whether such social policies have a distinct and original basis in seeking to breach and transcend this 'statist' post-war consensus while assessing their practical ability to function and effectively maintain good quality public service provision.

## **Methodology**

The recent and contemporary focus of this research proposal means that appropriate methodology and research methods have been used accordingly, in both qualitative (focusing on causes) and quantitative (focusing on data/statistics) terms. Research methodologies within the thesis have therefore primarily focused on a number of specific sources, notably media and newspaper articles, interviews with figures at the political forefront of the social policy agenda, along with a range of interviews, articles, political diaries and journalistic commentaries featuring various individuals from the world of academia, politics and the political blogosphere. All such sources of information offer

valuable yet distinct interpretations of the specific issues raised within the thesis and which are analysed and discussed within the various chapters. It is the qualitative approach that has been the prevailing research method within this thesis, and the interviews undertaken have ranged from grassroots to elite level of political activity and influence, and have been both in person and have also utilised information technology such as e-mail communication in order to gather the necessary primary information. Such a qualitative approach has featured extensive use of policy documents from the government, political parties and think-tanks, as well as Internet-based newspaper archives (from a broad range of titles), journal articles and political blogs which have been a vital means of re-enforced the contemporary subject content and dynamic nature of the issues being assessed and analysed. This emphasis on up-to-date and contemporary elements of the subject area in question has entailed that a wide range of newspaper and internet-based documentation and archive material has been a vital source in terms of accessing the most contemporary and dynamic information on the policy area being studied. This has provided an immediacy regarding the subject matter that enhances the status of such media documents and articles and instils them with historical value, yet tinged with a more contemporary flavour. Such a research approach and the subsequent range of sources used has been both appropriate and desirable in terms of addressing and exploring the key research questions and associated issues raised within the thesis, and this fusion of influences have subsequently created original primary research in relation to contemporary issues and events. This utilisation of a wide range of appropriate and varied sources of information provides a rigorous approach that aims to counteract bias and subjectivity.

Government papers and policy documents have an obvious tendency to reflect the values and political agenda of the administration of the day, although they are often cloaked with an 'official' style of more responsible and less explicitly partisan language than those that appear from opposition parties and external lobbying groups. Policy documents from opposition parties and think-tanks tend to be generally more explicit in expressing their political ideology and can employ a more expansive and radical style of language in making their key points due to their freedoms from the responsibilities of government, and this is evident in the documents that have been accessed as part of this research. In accessing such a significant range of policy documents alongside media and newspaper articles via a

qualitative method of research for this thesis, it is clearly apparent that the vast majority of newspaper articles are going to feature a bias on the part of the person who is writing it, reflecting the political ideology or agenda of the organisation that they are working for. Indeed, most newspapers with articles quoted within this thesis have a clear agenda and associated ideology for their target audience and identified readership, and this is acknowledged in how they are cited and analysed. Likewise, academic articles and primary interviews will feature a particular bias and subjectivity on the part of the author or the person being interviewed in seeking to promote their specific viewpoint or argument, as are the sentiments within documents produced by pressure groups, think-tanks and political parties.

In dealing with such likely bias within specific sources, other sources of information and other articles relating to the same subject matter have been specifically looked at and rigorously cross-checked to assess the accuracy of any claims, arguments and statistics provided by a particular article or interview. This cross-referencing of primary interviews, newspaper articles, policy documents, weblogs, as well as TV and media interviews has meant that information covered and supporting evidence provided by those with an explicit political agenda has been rigorously assessed, reflected on and processed accordingly. In adopting such a thorough approach it has been possible for a wider and more diverse range of secondary sources to be accessed and utilised in order to challenge or confirm information or claims initially derived from a primary source or indeed other secondary documents or articles, and this has resulted in appropriate analysis being made and subsequent conclusions reached. Such an academically thorough approach has primarily utilised rigorous qualitative methods for the following key reason:

*‘When we seek to understand or explain how and why a political institution, event, issue, or process came about, we are necessarily asking questions that can be answered through qualitative methods’<sup>8</sup>.*

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<sup>8</sup> Ariadne Vromen, ‘Debating Methods: Rediscovering Qualitative Approaches’ cited in David Marsh and Gerry Stoker (ed.), *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, (Palgrave-Macmillan, Basingstoke, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., 2010), Ch.12, p.249

In seeking to find causes and reasons as to what extent Conservative Party policy has changed, quantitative use of data and statistical analysis has only been a relatively small part of the research but have been used in places (to a lesser degree overall), and in order to reach appropriate conclusions the methodology has ultimately followed a primarily qualitative emphasis in order to offer the most practical and logical route towards a sound interpretation and balanced evaluation of the information obtained and used for the basis of this study. However, the concluding analysis remains interpretive to the extent that value-neutral observations are arguably impossible to achieve.

## **Originality**

In placing the focus of the thesis within an overall historical context, the period from 1997 onwards was therefore something of a unique and significant one in British politics (and particularly so from a Conservative perspective), given the party's unusually sustained and unprecedented exile from national office. The issues being analysed within this thesis are therefore tinged with this particular and original perspective, as there have been no other periods during the age of mass democracy where the Conservative Party have been out of national government for such a continuous period. Such a prolonged absence from power and three comprehensive general election defeats in succession between 1997 and 2005 entailed that the historical period being focused on represented the Conservative Party's most sustained period of opposition since 1832<sup>9</sup>, a notable and distinct phase of modern history that therefore provides an unprecedented era on which to focus. This sustained period away from government subsequently resulted in an introspective root and branch review of Conservative ideology and policy in a number of key areas, arguably on a scale not witnessed since the Thatcherite policy revolution originating from the mid-1970s onwards, and this is another original aspect to this academic study.

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<sup>9</sup> See Peter Snowdon: *'The Conservatives may have come back from the brink of annihilation - but the party now faces the closest election battle in decades'*, March 8<sup>th</sup> 2010, <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/platform/2010/03/peter-snowdon-the-conservatives-may-have-come-back-from-the-brink-of-annihilation-but-the-party-now-.html>

See also:

Peter Snowdon, *Back from the Brink: The Inside Story of the Tory Resurrection*, (Harper Press, London, 2010)

In the context of such a concerted revision of post-Thatcher Conservative policy direction, there has subsequently been significant contemporary conjecture within both media and academic circles as to just how extensive it has been in both a practical and theoretical sense<sup>10</sup>. While there have been prominent recent books and articles about Cameron, his associated ideas and the modern Conservative Party from academics and authors such as Bale, Blond, Elliott & Hanning, Jones, Snowdon along with a number of edited books about contemporary Conservative policy (Lee and Beech; Edwards; and Heppell and Seawright as examples)<sup>11</sup>, there is no specific book within the current academic market whereby a single author has sought to define in practical terms the true nature of Cameron's brand of Conservatism and the specific origins and impact of his government's key social policies since he became Prime Minister in 2010. While such other books cited have broadly written about Cameron's style and focus of 'Modern Conservatism', such books have either been primarily either descriptive or journalistic in nature, edited collections, advocacy<sup>12</sup> or essentially historically focused on the Conservative Party's political history up until 2010, prior to the party or David Cameron having the opportunity to implement any of its renewed and revised social policy agenda in practical terms. This thesis therefore aims to offer further academic value and originality in this respect, in the form of a monograph that offers a thorough analysis of the theoretical basis and the practical implementation of key Conservative social policy both before and after 2010, featuring a policy area that has been somewhat neglected by the party during the post-1979 political era in particular.

This academic study therefore addresses some fundamental questions in relation to the nature and motives of such an internal policy review, and in its post-2010 emphasis in assessing whether it has involved a fundamental and deep-seated revision of traditional

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<sup>10</sup> See academics and commentators such as Snowdon (above), Tim Bale, *The Conservative Party: From Thatcher to Cameron*, (Polity Press, London, 2011), Phillip Blond, *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It*, (Faber, London 2010), Francis Elliott and James Hanning, *Cameron: Practically a Conservative*, (Fourth Estate, London, 2012), Dylan Jones, *Cameron on Cameron: Conversations with Dylan Jones*, (Fourth Estate, London, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> See Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Jason Edwards (ed.), *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012) and Timothy Heppell and David Seawright (ed.), *Cameron and the Conservatives: The Transition to Coalition Government*, (Palgrave-Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2012)

<sup>12</sup> See Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010)

Conservative policy-making and ideology in order to embrace a more dynamic policy position in line with 21<sup>st</sup> century values and attitudes. An alternative perspective is that the Conservative leadership under David Cameron (from 2005 onwards) has rather reverted to a more 're-packaged', cosmetic and cautious image change, and has instead been more inclined to embrace 'statecraft'<sup>13</sup>, entailing a heightened focus on delivering practical governance and competence in office, which in turn has sought to merely modify rather than radically overhaul traditional policy positions, and therefore rejecting fundamental change in policy-making terms. This viewpoint would argue that in diluting (rhetorically at least) some of the overt and explicit ideological emphasis of the past (for example the Thatcherite hegemony of the 1980s), Cameron's Conservatism has instead embraced a more pragmatic dimension and approach to its socio-political strategy and broader approach to governance, and has merely moderated traditional values and attitudes in the name of ultimately securing national office. However, once in office, some commentators such as Phillip Blond have argued that it has reverted to 'Thatcherite' type<sup>14</sup>. This dynamic debate about the true nature and focus of the approach of modern Conservatism to such social policy matters and of the extent that such policy matters have changed since the mid-1990s will be developed more substantially within the main body of the thesis.

This focus on exploring and analysing the true nature of the apparent 'change' within the modern variant of Conservative social policy is therefore a particularly pertinent element that is pivotal to the whole thrust of this academic analysis. David Cameron's specific type of Conservatism has been the subject of much political conjecture, particularly due to his sustained rhetorical focus on changing the party's social policy agenda since he became Conservative Party Leader in late 2005. However following his significant role in drafting the Conservative Party's broadly right-wing 2005 general election manifesto<sup>15</sup>, and in the context of how the party's 2010 manifesto was subsequently altered and modified by

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<sup>13</sup> See Jim Bulpitt, *The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft*, Political Studies, (1986)

<sup>14</sup> See Phillip Blond, 'David Cameron has lost his chance to redefine the Tories', Comment is Free, The Guardian, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/03/cameron-one-nation-u-turn-tory-tragedy>

<sup>15</sup> 2005 Conservative Party Manifesto, 'Are You Thinking What We're Thinking?: It's Time for Action', <http://www.conservatives.com/pdf/manifesto-uk-2005.pdf>

comparison in both tone and substance<sup>16</sup>, this has raised legitimate questions about how genuine and sincere his apparent endorsement of more socially-orientated '*compassionate conservatism*' has been in more recent years<sup>17</sup>, and whether such a changed emphasis on policy and a new style of governance is due to pure pragmatism and political opportunism on his part, or is rather due to a healthily evolving ideological compass and a genuinely re-branded Conservative Party under his leadership. This analysis of the motives and factors behind the altered emphasis in modern Conservatism will be explored throughout the thesis, therefore offering further originality in seeking to categorically define and clarify the specific type of Conservatism promoted by David Cameron since he became party leader.

A further angle of originality is evident in the fact that the period since 2010 has seen the formation of Britain's first post-war coalition government, featuring the first hung Parliament since 1974<sup>18</sup>, and the '*first peace-time coalition since the 1930s*'<sup>19</sup>. The dynamics and tensions of coalition government are therefore also an important dimension to be addressed within the thesis in terms of how the original and somewhat unexpected coalition with the Liberal Democrats has particularly influenced Conservative Party social policy evolution. Such unique circumstances and original elements have been further heightened by an atmosphere of unprecedented economic austerity since 2010, and this has created an appropriately distinct environment to assess how the Conservative Party's post-1997 key social policies have developed and evolved in practical terms, within the context of the long-term post-Thatcherite legacy. For all of the warming words and changed rhetoric, at the heart of this study is the question as to whether the Conservative Party under David Cameron's leadership represents a genuinely new and reformed social policy agenda in practical terms. This context is central to the approach adopted by this academic

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<sup>16</sup> 2010 Conservative Party manifesto, '*Invitation to join the Government of Britain*', [http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Activist%20Centre/Press%20and%20Policy/Manifestos/Manifesto to2010](http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Activist%20Centre/Press%20and%20Policy/Manifestos/Manifesto%20to%202010)

<sup>17</sup> See Jon Bernstein, 'The Staggers: The New Statesman Blog', '*Poster Boy Dave and the Coming Campaign*', 'The New Statesman', 4<sup>th</sup> January 2010, <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2010/01/thinking-dave-campaign-tories>

<sup>18</sup> The only other post-war hung Parliament of February 1974 had resulted in a minority Labour government rather than a coalition. A further general election in October 1974 produced a Labour government with a small parliamentary majority.

<sup>19</sup> John Curtice, Stephen Fisher and Robert Ford, '*An Analysis of the Results*', cited in Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010), Appendix 2, p.418

analysis, providing a pivotal feature to be addressed throughout the main body of the thesis and within its concluding arguments in particular. The thesis ultimately concludes by returning to the original question and assessing to just what extent, if any, the Conservative Party's approach to social policy-making since 1997 has represented 'real change' or whether it has alternatively been merely a rhetorical emphasis on carefully-chosen 'warm words', and whether long-established Conservative attitudes and beliefs to the role of government, social justice, the state and civil society have either shifted or remained aligned to the party's traditional and more instinctive approach to such policy matters.



## **The significance of Ideology within the Conservative Party and its Influence on social policy-making**

The purpose of this initial chapter is develop a fundamental background basis for the overall thesis, namely to assess and seek to understand the significance of the role of ideology and its inherent influence in the formulation of the Conservative Party's social and welfare policies over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with particular focus on the contemporary political era, namely from the mid 1970s onwards and the emergence of 'Thatcherism' through to the Cameron leadership from 2005 onwards. In the context of the overall thesis therefore, this chapter seeks to specifically assess and analyse how the contrasting pressures of ideological or pragmatic factors have driven and shaped the party's policy-making agenda since losing national office in 1997, particularly in the sphere of social and welfare policy formulation. Which precise aspect is the most prevalent influence over any government's policy-making processes is clearly a key factor to consider within this debate and will probably vary over specific points in time. Within a modern political context therefore, the 1980s era of Conservative rule has been perceived as being more ideological in comparison to most of the previous post-war era, leading to a phase of policy prioritisation within the governing Conservative Party that saw economic policy generally given greater emphasis and precedence over the development of social policy, for reasons that various observers have claimed were primarily due to ideological factors, although practicality was not entirely absent. As a consequence of such an ideologically-tinged, economy-centric focus to policy-making, a wider public perception developed that *'Conservatives were disinterested in, and unable to offer solutions to, problems beyond the economic sphere'*<sup>20</sup>.

Such socio-economic policy friction within the modern political era forms the background to the ongoing funding and maintenance issues that lie at the heart of the contemporary debate in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century about the future shape of the British welfare state in its most general sense. This overall political context ultimately goes to the heart of illustrating what fundamentally motivates the Conservative Party in its pursuit of political

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Hayton, 'Conservative Party Modernisation and David Cameron's Politics of the Family', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol.81, No.4, (October-December 2010), p.499

office, whether it be an inherent and deep-rooted ideology that drives policy-making, a pragmatic reaction to the economic realities and social attitudes of the day or rather a more atavistic desire for power at all costs ('the politics of power'<sup>21</sup>), in line with the party's traditional image as being 'the natural party of government'. This chapter will therefore seek to identify what is the strongest factor that drives the general thrust of Conservative social policy in the contemporary political environment. It is usually the case that most political groups or organisations in any society are broadly influenced by some sort of ideology or fundamental beliefs, and it is these beliefs that will often unite and drive forward those that seek political office, and such an unerring and underlying ideology is what often distinguishes one party from its rivals for governance in terms of the influence, evolution and implementation of policies while in power. At its most fundamental level therefore, an ideology can be defined as follows:

*'A set of beliefs about political and social arrangements and intended primarily to justify action in respect to this environment.....'*<sup>22</sup>.

Such a core definition also acknowledges that a typical ideology '*is not a simple concept*' and which can essentially be viewed as '*a collection of aims, arguments and assumptions*'<sup>23</sup> that are not always clear in their meaning. What makes the concept of an ideology even more difficult to comprehensively define and wholly explain is that even within specific ideological viewpoints there are often significant variations and differences, and they can appear to be essentially fluid and dynamic concepts, ultimately '*a complex phenomenon in itself manifesting a notable variety or internal differences*'<sup>24</sup>. There has therefore been a considerable amount of academic and political debate over the years about the significance of ideology in influencing how governments of various political persuasions have performed while in office. Indeed, there has been much written about the ideological influences behind the specific policy-making agenda within mainstream party

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<sup>21</sup> Heppell, T. and Hill, M., 'Ideological Typologies of Contemporary British Conservatism', *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 3, p.335, (2005). This term was originally cited in Andrew Gamble, *The Conservative Nation*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1974)

<sup>22</sup> W.H Greenleaf, *The British Political Tradition Volume II: The Ideological Heritage*, (Methuen, London & New York, 1983), Ch.1, p.7

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., Ch.1, p.7-8

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., Ch.1, p.8

politics. Within this robust debate over how relevant ideology has been in terms of motivating and guiding the actions and behaviour of recent politicians, the conservative historian Maurice Cowling has rejected any uncertainty and sought to completely downgrade the significance of ideology in wider British politics for much of the past century<sup>25</sup>, dismissing the ‘romanticism of “causes”’<sup>26</sup> and instead arguing that ‘high politics’ is broadly dominated by a small elite driven not by ideology but by ‘*self-interest..... ambition and rivalry*’<sup>27</sup>. In promoting this somewhat unorthodox argument within a century of swirling ideological debate, Cowling argues that in the modern political era (20<sup>th</sup> century onwards), the senior hierarchy of the main political parties are from similar backgrounds and have traditionally had much in common in terms of the main socio-economic issues, with fundamental political and ideological differences limited as a result. Cowling’s viewpoint can be seen as contentious and open to dispute, particularly from the perspective of partisan and tribal politicians who would indicate clear ideological dividing lines between the various political parties. However it could be viewed as a valid analysis within the era of ‘consensus politics’ from 1945 onwards, and in the context of the overall debate that assesses how significant ideology is considered to be in the process of governance, it has provided a distinct angle of argument that would suggest that perhaps all administrations of all political persuasions are ultimately driven by the desire for power and the fulfilment of both personal and collective group political ambition, with ideological motives playing a limited role.

### **The impact of a changing British society on Conservative ideology and policy-making**

Due to the nature of a fluid and quickly changing society that emerged and became evident in the 1990s (much of which had been ostensibly shaped by Conservative policies and governance), British Conservatism appeared somewhat disorientated in its reaction to such developments, and this dazed and disconnected response culminated in the 1997 electoral massacre. In the election’s aftermath, distinct party divisions reflecting rival party traditions and factions came to the fore in how to respond to the new political landscape being carved

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<sup>25</sup> See Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Labour: 1920-1924*, (Cambridge University Press, 1971), Introduction.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Crowcroft, Review Article, ‘Maurice Cowling and the Writing of British Political History’, *Contemporary British History*, (Vol.22, No.2, June 2008), p.283

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.280

by New Labour. This was initially evident in the guise of high-profile 'social authoritarian' and moralistic party figures such as Ann Widdecombe and to a lesser extent William Hague, demanding a return to traditional social values, even 'Victorian' ones in a bid to revive the party's fortunes via attempts to revert to a more undiluted version of morally-infused social Conservatism. This however clashed with the more socially liberal Conservatives of the post-1997 era, e.g. Michael Portillo and Francis Maude<sup>28</sup>, often viewed as the 'modernisers' who wanted the party to absorb the changing social and political landscape and '*adopt a much more liberal line on "lifestyle" issues such as gay marriage and multiculturalism*'<sup>29</sup>, and effectively embrace much of the 'modern' Blairite social policy agenda. Contemporary academics and commentators analogously alluded to this division over social and moral issues as akin to societal divisions between '*Moderates versus Reactionaries*',<sup>30</sup> and such divisions went to the heart of the typologies of Conservatism analysed by Heppell (2002)<sup>31</sup>, who highlighted a three-dimensional model, which identified the party modernisers as embracing a broadly liberal line on 'social, sexual and moral policy', with the traditionalists taking a more conservative position on such matters. Such a contemporary liberal variant of Conservatism has been typified by recent comments of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, who in publicly supporting moves to legislate in favour of gay marriage, warned the Conservative Party in late 2012 that '*ditching the policy would be toxic electorally*'<sup>32</sup>.

This sense of friction between traditionalists and modernisers reflected the common perception that the party lacked a core and consistent ideological identity in the post-Thatcher era, and was also somewhat detached from changing public attitudes. This

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<sup>28</sup> See Kevin Hickson, 'The New Tories may be a puzzle but the pieces do make up a new kind of Britain', *Parliamentary Brief Online*, (30<sup>th</sup> March 2010),

<http://www.parliamentarybrief.com/2010/03/the-new-tories-may-be-a-puzzle-but-the-pieces>

For a more detailed summary of such internal Conservative divisions see also:

Simon Walters, *Tory Wars: Conservatives in Crisis*, (Politicos, London, 2001)

<sup>29</sup> Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon, 'The Barren Years: 1997-2005', cited in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *Recovering Power: The Conservatives in Opposition Since 1867*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005), Ch.11, p.255

<sup>30</sup> Richard Hayton, 'Conservative Party Modernisation and David Cameron's Politics of the Family', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol.81, (No.4, October-December 2010, p.492)

<sup>31</sup> See T.Heppell, 'The Ideological Composition of the British Conservative Party (1992-1997)', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 4 (2), (2002), p.299-324

<sup>32</sup> George Osborne, cited by Darren McCaffrey, 'PM Faces Tory Rebellion Over Gay Marriage', Sky News, 24<sup>th</sup> November 2012,

<http://news.sky.com/story/1015789/pm-faces-tory-rebellion-over-gay-marriage>

somewhat precarious political position was aligned with a basic need for political survival during the precarious Major years and a subsequent brutal removal from national office that was exacerbated by two further general election defeats in 2001 and 2005, and such factors ultimately instigated a period of sustained self analysis within the Conservative Party. Such a process is arguably a natural response by any political movement to such a series of significant electoral setbacks, and some academics and commentators such as Seldon and Snowdon have viewed the party in this period of the late 1990s as *'suffering from a crisis, battered by years of uncertainty about the party's identity'*<sup>33</sup>. This post-Thatcher state of turmoil and ideological haze was an unfamiliar one for the Conservative Party to be in the context of the general sense of political certainty during long periods of government for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thatcher's insertion of ideology and conviction into a party that had previously embraced pragmatism and consensus created a significant identity crisis on her departure from the political frontline in 1990, and this disruption to the party's equilibrium appeared to culminate in a sense of almost bewildered detachment from contemporary society in the years immediately before and following 1997.

Such a dislocation from the general public mood as outlined above (on social issues in particular) resulted in thirteen years in the relative wilderness of national political opposition which subsequently provided the Party with the necessary time that it required in order to adequately reflect and focus on what it essentially stood for in terms of its core beliefs, its overall identity, its ideological direction and what its key policy agenda should be based upon and influenced by. This sense of confusion over its identity had been a key legacy for the Conservative Party when the Thatcher era ended in 1990, with the ideological certainties and political dominance of the 1980s creating subsequent problems for the party's overall equilibrium in later years, and in this sense on an ideological and policy level, *'Thatcherism posed as much of a challenge for the Conservatives as it had done for Labour'*<sup>34</sup>. In a broader historical context, the cataclysmic watershed of three successive electoral setbacks forms a significant backdrop and an original aspect to the chronological

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<sup>33</sup> Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon, 'The Barren Years: 1997-2005', cited in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *Recovering Power: The Conservatives in Opposition Since 1867*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005), Ch.11, p.252-3

<sup>34</sup> Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.1, p.13

period in question, along with the distinctive and contemporary policy issues being analysed.

Policy development and renewal has subsequently evolved in an unprecedented manner and has focused on a whole range of socio-political issues, with the Conservative Party in opposition having to pragmatically acknowledge and embrace a plethora of ostensibly 'popular' economic and social policies implemented by the Labour governments of both Blair and Brown up until 2010. It has particularly been in the area of social policy that some of the most fundamental Conservative ideological soul-searching since 1997 has appeared to take place, within the policy sphere that broadly incorporates issues such as welfare, education, the NHS and more 'modern' environmental policy dimensions, and it is traditionally perceived to have been a sphere of public policy where the Conservatives have been eclipsed by the Labour Party and its more active and interventionist 'social' agenda. Subsequently there has been a general perception of a left-of-centre hegemony and influence over the evolution of social policy and a more 'socially just' policy direction within modern British politics, and that non-Conservative administrations have led the way in terms of initiatives and setting the agenda in this sphere. This can be said to have originated from both the 'years of consensus' after 1945 when the post-war Labour government set the policy agenda in this sphere, as well as the New Labour approach to public service reform since 1997, and the development and implementation of various social policy initiatives have traditionally demanded a more interventionist, statist focus that is more aligned with the Labour Party's approach to statecraft and governance.

Accordingly, during the 1980s in particular these were not policy areas that the Conservative Party appeared to give as much focus, priority or emphasis to in comparison to the fundamental problem of sorting out the country's 'broken economy' as they saw it, although concerted attempts to streamline the size and scope of the welfare state in particular were a long-term focus of mainstream Conservatism during this period. The party in office instead sought to mould a long-term '*neo-liberal economic settlement*'<sup>35</sup> that fundamentally shifted the economy's balance from the public to the private sector, and

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<sup>35</sup> Peter Osborne, 'Foreword', cited in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), p.X

which has been largely sustained to the present day. A recurring criticism of this period of Conservative government is however that social policy (particularly in terms of addressing long-term poverty and welfare reliance) was somewhat neglected in comparison to economic matters, ultimately being denied the appropriate attention and policy-making focus that it required. This was within the overall political context of the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher pursuing a revised and more 'free market' approach to both economic and social policy-making, in *'seeking to roll back the scope of the welfare state and therefore revers(ing) some of the more compassionate achievements of the post-1945 consensus'*<sup>36</sup>. Subsequently, this perception of neglect of social and welfare policy in terms of intellectual influence and policy-making thrust, has led to a broad acknowledgment within political circles that many aspects of contemporary social policy within mainstream British politics have been associated with and shaped by the left-of-centre values of some post-war Labour governments, particularly given the Labour Party's more traditional 'social' core agenda, in contrast with the Conservatives' more 'economic' focus (since 1979 in particular). This is the distinct perspective and context that this thesis is written from, namely the extent of social change, the sustained period of Labour government and its significant policy-making impact, coupled with the Conservatives' correlated and unprecedented exile from national office. The thesis therefore ultimately seeks to analyse the extent of both change and continuity in the formation of Conservative social policies since the late 1990s onwards amidst a period of fluid and dynamic social attitudes in the UK, which on the basis of recent evidence generally appear to have a more socially liberal outlook, yet which also somewhat paradoxically support cutbacks in welfare expenditure while at the same time desiring increases in taxation and wider public spending<sup>37</sup>. Within such a context, the thesis therefore seeks to identify and address the main driving forces behind the evolution of this specific social policy approach within this framework of complex social changes, namely whether it has been the persistent presence of traditional ideology, the emergence of genuinely new and innovative political ideas aligned with a genuine brand of New Conservatism, or alternatively a reversion to pragmatic statecraft.

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<sup>36</sup> Stephen J. Lee, *Aspects of British Political History 1914-1995*, (Routledge, Oxford, 1996), Ch.15, p.231

<sup>37</sup> BBC News website, 'UK attitudes on immigration and welfare 'toughening'', 17<sup>th</sup> September 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19621020>

## Statecraft as a model of governance

The Conservative Party in particular has often been viewed as being the least ideological of the mainstream British political parties, unlike its principal Labour opponent being unburdened by an emotional attachment to a theoretical ideology with a coherent vision of the future such as socialism. It has therefore been seen by academic observers as essentially '*a pragmatic rather than an ideological party*'<sup>38</sup>, and one modern politician has observed that it is inherently a pragmatic political viewpoint that '*has never settled on a conclusion*'<sup>39</sup>. Such an interpretation of the British Conservative Party focuses on its beliefs in an organic and gradually changing political and socio-economic model, aligned with the image '*of a slowly evolving society*'<sup>40</sup>. Given this broad perception that Conservative administrations have therefore traditionally been less ideological and more inclined to '*pragmatic adaptation*'<sup>41</sup> in their approach to governance in comparison to Labour variants for much of the twentieth century, there has been some specific academic analysis regarding the ostensible key motivations of Conservative governments and their associated policy-making within the post-war period in particular, notably since the Thatcher era from 1979 onwards. Within this context, one contemporary Conservative commentator has highlighted the vital importance of political office to the Conservative approach to governance, remarking that '*Conservatism, unlike socialism, is not merely a bundle of ideas, or a disposition, or a way of viewing the world. Rather, it must be realised in government to have substance*'<sup>42</sup>. Two notable contributions to this academic debate relating to the Conservative Party's fundamental attitude and motivation towards governance include the notion of 'statecraft' as developed by Jim Bulpitt<sup>43</sup> in the early 1980s, and also the analysis of the origins and

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<sup>38</sup> Heppell, T. and Hill, M., 'Ideological Typologies of Contemporary British Conservatism', *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 3, p.335, (2005). See also Robert Leach, '*British Political Ideologies*', (Prentice Hall Europe, Hemel Hempstead, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1996), Ch.5, p.101

<sup>39</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.5, p.90

<sup>40</sup> Robert M. Page, 'The Conservative Party and the Welfare State since 1945', Ch.2, p.24, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011)

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Goodman, Executive Editor of Conservative Home website, '*It's two years away, but the 2015 election is already lost*', The Daily Telegraph, 29<sup>th</sup> December 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/9770710/Its-two-years-away-but-the-2015-election-is-already-lost.html>

<sup>43</sup> Jim Bulpitt, 'The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft', *Political Studies*, (1986), p.21



alleged key factors in the party's ostensible political hegemony for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as outlined by Andrew Gamble<sup>44</sup> in the mid-1990s, with both academics covering a different end of the Conservative Party's 18-year monopoly of national political office (1979-97). In analysing the early period of the Thatcher years, Bulpitt argues quite simply that ideology has played a marginal and secondary role in the Conservative Party's political performance over the modern political era and that its main focus for governance has been 'statecraft', essentially:

*'the art of winning elections and achieving some necessary degree of governing competence in office'*<sup>45</sup>.

Bulpitt's position essentially claims that in wielding office and moulding policy, the Conservative Party has an historical tendency to take a pragmatic approach and react to circumstances rather than follow a clear ideological plan or blueprint while in political office, preferring to deal with the 'high politics' of public office rather than focusing on grassroots political influences. In similar yet distinctive vein to Cowling's ideology-free analysis of party political motivations while in power, Bulpitt's viewpoint ultimately relegates ideology behind pragmatism and managerial competence in explaining the motives and influences behind Conservative political behaviour for the majority of the modern political period, particularly from the mid-19th century onwards. In one sense it therefore acknowledges an elitist model of politics like Cowling, rejecting the significance of ideology as determinant of political action and instead seeing Conservative administrations as essentially representing '*a philosophy of government or a ruling-class ideology*'<sup>46</sup>. This argument therefore suggests that flagship Conservative policies of the 1980s such as privatisation were not part of a grandiose ideological vision but were in fact low-key priorities at the start of the party's tenure in office and only gained momentum due to circumstantial developments as the decade progressed. This view represented a rejection of those that viewed Thatcher as an ideological crusader, although it must be noted that Bulpitt wrote in the early part of the

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<sup>44</sup> Andrew Gamble, 'The Crisis of Conservatism', *New Left Review*, (No.214, November-December 1995), <http://newleftreview.org/l/214/andrew-gamble-the-crisis-of-conservatism>

<sup>45</sup> Jim Bulpitt, 'The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft', *Political Studies*, (1986), p. 21

<sup>46</sup> Robert Leach, *British Political Ideologies*, (Prentice Hall Europe, Hemel Hempstead, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1996), Ch.5, p.101

1980s when a considerable amount of Margaret Thatcher's ideological emphasis and rhetoric had yet to appear.

Bulpitt's analysis therefore concluded that statecraft was the key driver of government policy-making and formulation and overall actions in office, essentially the need for a political party to prove its competence in office in the shorter term order to ensure a credible and competent reputation and subsequently a long-term maintenance of political power. Bulpitt's view is partially acknowledged by Philip Norton in a further analysis of Thatcher's period in office carried out in the latter phase of the 1980s, and Norton's study equally rejected the perceived ideological predominance of Thatcherism, instead arguing that the Conservative Party of the 1980s vintage again adhered to '*something central to Conservative thought: circumstance*'<sup>47</sup> (as opposed to a focused ideology). In this context, Norton claimed that most MPs during the Thatcher era were essentially party loyalists who would primarily support the leadership as opposed to adhering to any clear ideological position, and such an argument again emphasised that the Conservative Party in office has had a tendency to focus on a pragmatic approach alongside short-term events and developments, rather than following a clear pre-ordained blueprint of designated political actions within a long-term ideological focus. Many political commentators have subsequently offered competing analysis and assessments as to the nature of the ideological influences on the Conservative Party throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with one more modern political viewpoint arguing that the party has generally tended to explicitly reject ideology for a more pragmatic and instinctive political approach (at least until the Thatcher era 1975-90):

*'Conservatives are wary of grand statements of principles and beliefs. Many attribute the political success of British conservatism to its pragmatism- its concern with political practice not political theory'*<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> Philip Norton, 'The Lady's Not For Turning: But What About The Rest?', Margaret Thatcher And The Conservative Party (1979-1989'), *Parliamentary Affairs* 43 (1990), p.58, <http://pa.oxfordjournals.org/content/43/1/41.full.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, (Penguin, London, 1992), Ch.2. p.3

Such an analysis adheres to the inherently pragmatic and flexible root of Conservative policy-making, notably that its desire for power and government tends to outweigh aloof and detached philosophies associated with the theorising of hostile and more abstract ideologies such as socialism. On this basis it has been argued that Conservatives forcefully reject and *'have nothing to do with theory, ideology and abstractions'*<sup>49</sup>, and as an established political movement, over the course of modern politics it has therefore generally been viewed as adopting a pragmatic approach to governance that tends to over-ride and transcend ideological considerations. Conservative academics and theorists such as Oakeshott have referred to this pragmatic vision as representing a practical approach to politics that rejects incomprehensible theories and rationalist ideologies that are often detached from everyday life<sup>50</sup>. In this sense, such an interpretation of conservatism is that of a political outlook not guided by some overarching ideological blueprint, but instead which seeks to proceed *'without a pre-conceived plan or dogma, taking advantage of circumstances and building on successes'*<sup>51</sup>, and indeed ultimately seeking to both manage and adapt to the tide of change within society. Indeed, any ideological attachment is often viewed as a negative thing among some conservative schools of thought, with the 19<sup>th</sup> century Conservative Leader Benjamin Disraeli dismissing contemporary ideological alternatives such as socialism as being *'mechanistic'* as well as being *'bleak and materialistic'*<sup>52</sup> in their essentially rational analysis of society. In seeking to modernise the Conservative Party's image as a political force within the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Disraeli established a pragmatic tendency within British conservatism that embraced various social and democratic changes taking place, and alternatively favoured *'pragmatic empiricism'*<sup>53</sup>, in short, deliberately keeping ideology as a low-profile and often an anonymous feature of the Conservative Party image and appearance. Consequently for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this pragmatic streak within the Conservative Party remained dominant, and certainly until the Thatcher era from the mid-1970s onwards, the party succeeded in ensuring that any tendencies towards *'Conservative (ideological) exhibitionism*

<sup>49</sup> Ted Honderich, *Conservatism*, (Penguin Books, London, 1990), Ch.2, p.18

<sup>50</sup> See Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1962)

<sup>51</sup> Ian Gilmour, *Dancing With Dogma: Britain Under Thatcherism*, (Simon & Schuster, London, 1992), Ch.5, p.118

<sup>52</sup> David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, (Penguin, London, 1992), Ch.2. p.11

<sup>53</sup> Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics And Philosophy Of Inequality*, (I.B Tauris, London, 2011), Ch.1, p.7

*has..... often taken the form of veiling such matters in a decent obscurity*<sup>54</sup>, possibly due to the regular outbursts of internal division evident within the more ideological Labour Party since its emergence from the early 1900s onwards.

### **The Legacy of One Nation Conservatism**

In this context of seeking to mould an explicitly alternative approach to an ideological emphasis on policy-making, Disraeli adopted a somewhat vague 'One Nation' brand of Conservatism that was more in tune with a pragmatic governing instinct and general 'paternalistic' social responsibility as opposed to any specific blueprint for governance or policy-making. Indeed in his 19<sup>th</sup> century novel 'Sybil' (The Two nations), Disraeli coined the origin of this phrase by alluding to:

*'Two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets..... The rich and the poor'*<sup>55</sup>.

However, some of those more sceptical of Disraeli's ostensibly noble and moralistic motives have claimed that the great Conservative statesman was fully aware of the significance of protecting his own 'class' and the maintenance of the traditional social order, and this in itself was a form of underlying and implicit ideological influence that ultimately moulded his overall style and approach to governance<sup>56</sup>.

Nevertheless, the social basis of Disraeli's analysis of a divided and class-ridden Britain resulted in a political remedy that required paternalistic state intervention and progressive and enlightened social policies, a reaction that appeared to be influenced by a fusion of humanitarian concern for the broader social welfare alongside a degree of party

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<sup>54</sup> W.H Greenleaf, *The British Political Tradition Volume II: The Ideological Heritage*, (Methuen, London & New York, 1983), Ch.6, p.189

<sup>55</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil (or The Two Nations)*, (1845) Book 2, Ch.5, p.65-66

<sup>56</sup> In 1848 Disraeli appeared to clearly indicate a class motive to his beliefs, commenting on revolutionary uprisings across Europe that:

*"The palace is not safe, when the cottage is not happy"*, cited in Robert Leach, *British Political Ideologies*, (Prentice Hall Europe, Hemel Hempstead, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1996), Ch.5, p.119. See also Ted Honderich, *Conservatism*, (Penguin Books, London, 1990), Ch.6 & 7.

political calculation. Such a non-ideological emphasis established a political seam that would run deep in the Conservative Party for many years to come, and for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this meant that there were clear distinctions in the differing attitudes towards ideology between the Conservative Party and its main political rival for much of this historical period:

*'Since its formation in 1900, Labour has been the ideological and sectional party in British politics..... (and) it was comparatively easy for the Conservatives to appeal to all sections of the nation, while their "dogma-light" approach allowed a continual update of policies.....'<sup>57</sup>.*

In short, such an analysis of the Conservative Party's approach to governance reflects a tendency for its adherents to be scornful of Labour's traditional inclinations towards a more ideological agenda, and instead seems to prefer the approach that *'doctrine and theory were subordinate to political calculation'*<sup>58</sup> and indeed, circumstance. In this context of facing an ideology-driven principal political opponent, some fifty years after Disraeli was in office there emerged the figure of Stanley Baldwin, Conservative Prime Minister on three separate occasions in the inter-war years and who was the era's dominant political figure. He further embraced this tradition and firmly rejected the ideological approach to governance during a period of inter-war class tensions and the growth of socialism. Baldwin, whose own son became a Labour MP<sup>59</sup>, was ostensibly non-ideological to the extent that he *'even thought socialism and capitalism did not really exist'*<sup>60</sup>, and he is therefore associated with the 'One Nation' conservative tradition by virtue of such a political approach. In pursuing this political style, Baldwin developed a paternalistic image that emphasised the national interest over divisive class divisions and the ideological differences that were prevalent in this era, although despite cultivating this approach, he did preside over the 1926 General Strike, one of the bitterest class-based disputes of the

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<sup>57</sup> Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon, 'The Barren Years: 1997-2005', cited in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *Recovering Power: The Conservatives in Opposition Since 1867*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005), Ch.11, p.244

<sup>58</sup> Heppell, T. and Hill, M., 'Ideological Typologies of Contemporary British Conservatism', (2005), *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 3, p.339

<sup>59</sup> Oliver Baldwin was Labour MP for Dudley (1929-31)

<sup>60</sup> Ian Gilmour & Mark Garnett, *Whatever Happened To The Tories?: The Conservative Party since 1945*, (4<sup>th</sup> Estate, London, 1997), Ch.15, p.383

20<sup>th</sup> century. This 'One Nation' tradition did however soon appear to reach a particular zenith of influence within the party's internal structure with the publication of 'The Middle Way'<sup>61</sup> in 1938, Harold Macmillan's rejection of the 'laissez-faire' attitudes espoused by some Conservatives during the 'hungry thirties', and an affirmation of the party's moderate 'centrist' image, which sought '*to save capitalism from itself*' by rejecting the un-regulated free market as a '*combination of misery and inefficiency*'<sup>62</sup>.

However, despite this non-ideological and paternalistic tradition being broadly associated with the liberal, moderate and left-wing of the party, it has always attracted an eclectic mix of supporters to its cause, including free-market Conservatives such as Enoch Powell, who became a key Thatcherite influence and acolyte in his later years. What ultimately bound the 'One Nation' Conservatives together was a primary focus '*not in economic but in social policy*'<sup>63</sup> with a paternalistic approach to maintaining strong communities alongside adequate and benevolent welfare policies in particular. In this context, in the post-war years after 1945, 'One Nation' politics remained at the forefront of Conservative governance and political behaviour while in office, embracing '*an active state approach*' that '*saw the state as the key player in ameliorating social problems*'<sup>64</sup>. As a consequence of this non-ideological tradition and heritage, it was said that for much of its modern existence, and up to the emergence of Thatcher's 'New Right' in the mid-1970s in particular, that there was a notable limitation of ideological focus within the Conservative Party and that '*Conservatives were always non-doctrinaire, pragmatic and capable of adjusting to the exigencies of the moment*'<sup>65</sup>.

Such a well-established and historical tendency within the Conservative Party had therefore been established over many decades, and it had been broadly associated with a pragmatic and moderate approach to governance, with the development of fluent and

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<sup>61</sup> Harold Macmillan, *The Middle Way*, (Macmillan, London, 1938)

<sup>62</sup> Norman Barry, 'New Right', cited in Kevin Hickson (ed.), *The Political Thought of the Conservative Party since 1945*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.2, p.35

<sup>63</sup> David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, (Penguin, London, 1992), Ch.3. p.37

<sup>64</sup> Matt Beech, 'Cameron and Conservative Ideology', cited in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.2, p.21

<sup>65</sup> Norman Barry, 'New Right', cited in Kevin Hickson (ed.), *The Political Thought of the Conservative Party since 1945*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.2, p.29

innovative social policies emanating from the centralised state a key aspect of this 'paternalistic' political outlook. Established figures within the post-war Conservative Party between the 1950 and 1970s such as Macmillan, Butler and Heath appeared to be generally imbued with the over-riding post-war consensual mentality<sup>66</sup>, and this moderate political viewpoint appeared to reject the extremities of left and right-wing ideological conflict and appeared to gladly embrace the '*years of consensus*' after 1945, regardless of the prevailing social-democratic slant of the period that was a source of grievance for the 'New Right' of the party in later years. Indeed, this right-of-centre party faction viewed such a policy settlement in a resentful ideological sense, ultimately rejecting its values and emphases as being part of '*democratic socialist consensus*'<sup>67</sup>. In this context, the overt ideological tendencies of 'Thatcherism' that erupted in the 1980s were viewed by many of the party's established 'grandees' as a political aberration, a dynamic break with the steady evolution, conventional methods and 'organic' approach of Conservative governments of the past, and whose legacy was perceived as destructively disrupting the Conservative Party's natural equilibrium for the next twenty years.

### **Thatcher and ideological Conservatism**

There are therefore some academics and commentators (Norton and Bulpitt to varying extents), who would argue that contrary to the wider perception of some parts of the media and the wider public, the perceived Thatcherite dominance of the 1980s was something of an illusion in terms of its long-term impact and that the majority of Conservative politicians continued to adhere to a less ideological approach. In this context, while the Thatcherites may have seized the party leadership in 1975 and sought to inject a more ideological direction to governance, the reality was that the 'Thatcherites' were actually '*in a minority*'

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<sup>66</sup> Heath's position on the Conservative Party spectrum has been the subject of disagreement among academic commentators, with some claiming he adhered to consensus yet with a more 'technocratic' style of government, but others arguing that he was the forerunner of Thatcherism before embarking on some well-publicised policy u-turns in 1971-72.

For further analysis of this matter see Mark Garnett, 'Planning for Power: 1964-70', cited in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *Recovering Power: The Conservatives in Opposition Since 1867*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005), Ch.9

<sup>67</sup> Matt Beech, 'Cameron and Conservative Ideology', cited in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.2, p.21

*within the party*’ and that there was ‘*no Thatcherite hegemony within government*’<sup>68</sup>. This argument would claim that the Conservative Party from the mid-1970s onwards was in fact a balanced and diverse body that reflected the varying political traditions of the party, and that the explicit ideological emphasis towards governance of Thatcherism was in fact a fundamental detachment from an inherent and historic non-ideological Conservative pragmatism. However, the political reality was that Thatcher and her close allies held the reins of the party leadership from 1975 onwards, and in policy terms such an ideological focus arguably created a less balanced and conciliatory style of government after 1979, consequently appearing to regard the post-war settlement regarding social policy issues and the related aspects of broader public welfare as less of a priority than the need to address economic matters, and this would exacerbate the potential for further social divisions in the process. An interesting ‘fused’ interpretation of Thatcher’s motives has been offered by Andrew Gamble, who acknowledges that there was no intricate blueprint for power, but perhaps instead a more strategic vision:

*‘Thatcherism is sometimes presented as though in 1979 there existed a set of policy blueprints ready for immediate implementation. No actual policy process could ever work in that way. What distinguished the Thatcher government from its predecessors was not detailed policy plans but its strategic sense of its long-term, objectives and its pragmatism concerning the means to achieve them’*<sup>69</sup>.

However there have been politicians and commentators who challenge this politically ‘pragmatic’ interpretation and emphasis to declare that core ideological beliefs have indeed been at the root of the party’s electoral performances over the course of modern history and have indeed been the ultimate driving forces behind how the party has functioned while in office. A further analysis by Andrew Gamble examined the Conservative Party’s fortunes during a particular nadir of the party’s modern history during the mid-1990s. He argued that far from lacking an ideological bedrock of inherent beliefs, the

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<sup>68</sup> Philip Norton, ‘The Lady’s Not For Turning: But What About The Rest?, Margaret Thatcher And The Conservative Party (1979-1989)’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 43 (1990), p.55, <http://pa.oxfordjournals.org/content/43/1/41.full.pdf>

<sup>69</sup> Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1994), Introduction, p.6



Conservative Party was in fact traditionally aligned with some fundamental political principles ('The Pillars of Conservative Hegemony'<sup>70</sup>) which according to Gamble were The Constitution, The Union, Property and Empire (nationalism)<sup>71</sup>. Such pillars will certainly have driven the Thatcher 'New Right' project in a broad direction, without offering precise policy formulation. However Gamble's argument was that by the mid-1990s the Conservative Party had seen its association with such principles and 'pillars' weakened by their ostensible lack of relevance to changing public attitudes, which could provide a key explanation for the party's significant electoral malaise of this period. However while Gamble's position did accept the importance of core ideological foundations in driving the party's policy formulation and behaviour in office, he did not accept that such changing social and political developments should detract from the fundamental priority of winning elections and governing competently in the process (the basic tenets of the 'statecraft' theory<sup>72</sup>).

This particular interpretation of Conservative motivations for governance, with more emphasis on the significance of ideological thought and a set of beliefs, was most explicitly exposed and highlighted by the ideologically-driven years of Thatcherism during the 1980s. This counter-argument to the pragmatic approach to holding office has been partially acknowledged by some cerebral Conservative politicians such as David Willetts who has suggested that:

*'Conservatives do indeed have political principles- but they have emerged from political practice. Conservatives like their ideas made flesh in particular historical figures and circumstances'*<sup>73</sup>.

Such an analysis as espoused by contemporary Conservative politicians such as Willetts appears to suggest that a specific variant of ideological principles derive from empirical experience of political office, and this interpretation has also been re-affirmed from a more academic and politically neutral perspective as reflecting a scenario that:

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<sup>70</sup> Andrew Gamble, 'The Crisis of Conservatism', *New Left Review*, (No.214, November-December 1995), p.8  
<http://newleftreview.org/l/214/andrew-gamble-the-crisis-of-conservatism>

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p.8

<sup>72</sup> See Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and The Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1988)

<sup>73</sup> David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, (Penguin, London, 1992), Ch.2. p.4

*‘.... while formally eschewing abstract doctrine and the policy blueprint, Conservatives have usually been prepared to admit to a certain perhaps instinctive approach to politics, a rather vaguely formed disposition or “mode of feeling”’<sup>74</sup>.*

This particular analysis therefore suggests that Conservatives do have inherent principles that derive from deep-rooted experiences, instincts and lessons from the past, and this in turn informs and directs contemporary policy-making in an appropriate ‘ideological’ direction from an essentially empirical basis. This approach is said to have ideological implications in that it often seeks to defend the existing status quo in the process, and in this distinct interpretation of conservatism, the UK Conservative Party (even before the Thatcher period) has tended to broadly provide a political viewpoint that is more than just a movement that resists change, but is alternatively a movement that over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has developed policy whose:

*‘ideological content was derived from the doctrinal motivated values that underpinned their policy prescriptions, which were designed to enable the Conservative Party to defend the existing social order’<sup>75</sup>.*

This particular interpretation by Heppell and Hill aligns a degree of ideology with a defence of a status quo ostensibly skewed in favour of Conservative interests, and is said to inspire the political actions of Conservative politicians and their formulation of policy despite the absence of a clear blueprint for action in dealing with various circumstances and occasions that an ideological creed or explicit doctrine would perhaps provide. Any sense of ideology therefore derives from the actual activities and pragmatic experiences of previous spells of governance, and it is therefore argued by academics like Leach that any existence of a *‘conservative ideology has to be substantially inferred from the actions of Conservative*

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<sup>74</sup> W.H Greenleaf, *The British Political Tradition Volume II: The Ideological Heritage*, (Methuen, London & New York, 1983), Ch.6, p.190

<sup>75</sup> Heppell, T. and Hill, M., ‘Ideological Typologies of Contemporary British Conservatism’, (2005), *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 3, p.339

*governments*<sup>76</sup>. Consequently, an ideological guidance and tradition can be said to emerge from the practical and empirical realities of the everyday governance of the past, not from a detached and abstract philosophy that may never have been practically applied to everyday situations. This criticism could be applied to the explicitly ideological concepts of socialism or social democratic theory as is ostensibly the case for the party's main political rivals, the Labour Party, although this analysis could perhaps be open to debate after the political pragmatism of the New Labour era (1997-2010). This emphasis on practical experience ultimately influencing future administrations is not dissimilar to Bullpitt's basic analysis of the significance of 'statecraft', although unlike Bulpitt it promotes the existence of key ideas and principles over mere pragmatism and managerial competence. This more ideological emphasis would ultimately argue therefore that the Thatcherite ideological emphasis of the 1980s was *'not some kind of aberration..... (but) the adoption of an agenda consistent with tradition'*<sup>77</sup>,

However, given the broader context of a perceived absence of clear ideological direction during the post-war years (particularly in relation to Heath's government from 1970-74), a direct and recurring internal party criticism of the Conservative governments of this period has been that in attempting to run the machinery of government with such a pragmatic 'managerial' ethos, figures such as Willetts argue that such an approach to governance can be viewed as an affront to the party's intrinsic ideological traditions:

*'A Conservative cannot simply approach politics in such a managerial spirit. There is bedrock of principle on which a Conservative government has to rest'*<sup>78</sup>.

In this context of enshrined and deep-rooted principles, it has therefore been argued, (and cited as both a strength and a weakness) that there are some notable examples of Conservative administrations that have been vehemently ideological, for example:

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<sup>76</sup> Robert Leach, *British Political Ideologies*, (Prentice Hall Europe, Hemel Hempstead, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1996), Ch.5, p.102

<sup>77</sup> Norman Barry, 'New Right', cited in Kevin Hickson (ed.), *The Political Thought of the Conservative Party since 1945*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.2, p.29

<sup>78</sup> David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, (Penguin, London, 1992), Ch.3. p.46

*'The Conservative Governments of 1979-97 ..... were fervently ideological and triumphalist'*<sup>79</sup>.

This specific historical period, particularly during the Thatcher years of power between 1979-90, witnessed explicit ideological influences coming to the surface on an unprecedented scale, evident in the clear influence of the academic F.A Hayek and his seminal anti-collectivist work *'The Road to Serfdom'*<sup>80</sup>, along with the developing views of the economist Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics in the shaping of policy-making during this sustained period of Conservative government. Indeed, in sharp conflict with Bulpitt's alternative theory that pragmatic 'statecraft' (and not ideology) was the main driving force behind much of the Thatcher period of government<sup>81</sup>, there do exist strong suggestions to the contrary, not least deriving from the direct sentiments of the dominant political figure of this period herself (as recalled by a contemporary Cabinet Minister):

*'JA (Jonathan Aitken) remembers one or two specifics about MT (Margaret Thatcher) at these meetings..... she did say at an early one, "We must have an ideology. The other side have got an ideology, by which they can test things, we should have one as well"'*.<sup>82</sup>

While such comments could perhaps be interpreted as reflecting a somewhat simplistic and adversarial approach to politics from one perspective, at another level it does indicate that Thatcher recognised the significance of ideology in presenting a clear, focused and coherent message to the electorate within the political climate in which she operated, as well as acknowledging its significant function of establishing a cogent political identity in

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<sup>79</sup> Ian Gilmour & Mark Garnett, *Whatever Happened To The Tories?: The Conservative Party since 1945*, (4<sup>th</sup> Estate, London, 1997), Ch.15, p.383

<sup>80</sup> F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1944)

<sup>81</sup> Bulpitt argued that the 'consistency' and 'purpose' of the first term of the Thatcher administration (1979-83) was fuelled:

*'..... not in its ideas or ideology, but in the realm of party statecraft'.*

Cited in Jim Bulpitt, *'The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft'*, *Political Studies*, (1986), p.39

<sup>82</sup> Jonathan Aitken, Conservative MP, Interview with Hugo Young, 1 February 1988, cited in *The Hugo Young Papers: A Journalist's Notes from the Heart of Politics*, Ion Trewin (ed.), (Penguin, London, 2009), p.271

the process. Subsequently, the Thatcherite ideological focus on core economic issues and key political priorities such as monetarism and the control of inflation led to a situation whereby the Thatcher government progressively ‘.....inserted into Conservative policy ..... a dogmatic tone that had previously been lacking’.<sup>83</sup> ‘One Nation’ critics from the left of the Conservative Party, derided by the Thatcherites as ‘Wets’, fully acknowledged the more explicit ideological direction of the post-1979 Conservative government from the outset, despite being firmly opposed to the approach that Thatcher was taking :

*‘..... the 1979 government had an ideology (or something very like one)..... and attempts to reach consensus or compromise would merely adulterate truth with error and reproduce the deficiencies of previous governments’.*<sup>84</sup>

Such an ideological approach to governance that appeared to stem from the inferred failures of previous Conservative governments (in both economic and social policy terms) antagonised some factions of the contemporary party. In particular, the ‘One Nation’ wing of the Conservative Party were collectively concerned with the specific implications for social policy and related welfare issues in particular, primarily due to the apparent downgrading of such issues as political priorities from 1979 onwards in comparison to other areas such as taxation, industrial relations and law and order. Such was the impact of this ideological shift and the wider repercussions for society of the Thatcherite economic focus on retrenchment in the early 1980s, and in this context therefore, this post-1979 approach represented a marked contrast to previous post-war Conservative governments as it focused on *‘reversing the collectivism of the post-war years’*<sup>85</sup>. This was specifically the case in its rejection of the (social-democratic) consensus politics of the previous thirty years, ‘consensus’ being the anathema to ideology and conviction, a term dismissed by Margaret Thatcher as being associated with those who had abandoned *‘all beliefs, principles and values’*<sup>86</sup>. Thatcher’s disdain of consensual, relatively high-spending previous

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<sup>83</sup> Ian Gilmour, *Dancing With Dogma: Britain Under Thatcherism*, (Simon & Schuster, London, 1992), Ch.1, p.8

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., Ch.1, p.1

<sup>85</sup> Philip Norton, ‘The Lady’s Not For Turning: But What About The Rest?, Margaret Thatcher And The Conservative Party (1979-1989)’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 43 (1990), p.42, <http://pa.oxfordjournals.org/content/43/1/41.full.pdf>

<sup>86</sup> Cited in Ian Gilmour, *Dancing With Dogma: Britain Under Thatcherism*, (Simon & Schuster, London, 1992), Ch.1, p.4

administrations (of all parties), was coupled by a rejection of their limited and timid ideological direction. This Thatcherite analysis of the perceived financial profligacy of successive post-war governments was aligned to an over-generous welfare state that encouraged dependency, and this would have significant implications for the formulation of both economic and social policy-making during the watershed political decade of the 1980s.

In this context, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Labour Party's more explicit adherence to socialist principles has meant that it has often received a stronger association with ideology and theory, with the Conservative links to this aspect of political behaviour often downgraded by comparison. This has been due to a traditionally reduced Conservative emphasis on this aspect of influence over political activity and the formulation of policy-making, with many from this political viewpoint opting for a more pragmatic and adaptable approach to such matters instead. However, many political and media commentators have argued that such a situation has perhaps reversed in recent years, particularly with the more ideological approach of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, who imposed '*an ideological dogma upon the traditionally non-ideological Conservative Party*'<sup>87</sup>. This notably contrasted with the New Labour stance from the mid-1990s onwards, which was broadly and deliberately 'ideology-light' in its political approach, particularly under Tony Blair from 1994 who preferred dealing with policy formulation on a more flexible and pragmatic basis. However, despite the desire by some acolytes to instil an unerring element of ideology and theory into the doctrine of Thatcherism, commentators such as Letwin have firmly rejected its claim to have theoretical aspects, primarily due its unerring pragmatism and focus on dynamism and 'vigorous virtues'<sup>88</sup>:

*'Thatcherism..... never pretended to consist in an academic analysis of politics at any level of abstraction. Its concern has been with action. Thatcherism has not got what it takes to be a theory'*<sup>89</sup>.

## **Modern Conservatism and future approaches to governance**

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<sup>87</sup> Heppell, T. and Hill, M., '*Ideological Typologies of Contemporary British Conservatism*', *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 3, p.335, (2005).

<sup>88</sup> See Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, (Fontana, London, 1992), Ch.2

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch.2, p.27

Ultimately, in the context of this wider debate about the influence of pragmatism, ideology and theory on various post-war Conservative governments in particular, the key question is how much weight have ideological and theoretical influences had on driving Conservative ideas and policies (notably social and welfare policies) since the late 1990s, as opposed to the alternative approach of greater and more flexible pragmatic influences. The subsequent analysis has therefore focused on whether ideology or pragmatism has been the main factor in shaping the party's social policy agenda in the modern political environment, or alternatively a fusion of the two. This question is particularly pertinent in the context of the revolutionary economic upheaval that Britain experienced during the 1980s, a decade in which fundamental economic restructuring appeared to take precedence in terms of government policy-making, with questions subsequently asked about how much attention and innovation was given by the governing Conservative Party to social policy and the promotion of 'civic society' by comparison. This debate has therefore been specifically prominent following the legacy of the Thatcherite socio-economic 'revolution' of the 1980s, and then in the aftermath of the 1997 electoral disaster, when the Conservatives had to reinvent their core policy agenda and their overall political identity.

In the post-Thatcher era, the debate about ideology has continued to generate much internal party debate focusing on whether more or less ideological emphasis and focus is desirable in future Conservative administrations, with an uncertain overall analysis as to whether the prominence of ideology will strengthen or weaken the party's overall identity and practical electoral appeal in the long-term. Some academic analysis has subsequently asserted that in the wake of a decade of apparent certainty in the art of governance and statecraft that was arguably the source of the party's political success in the 1980s, the party in fact struggled to administer power in a similarly competent way from 1990 onwards:

*'The electoral decline and fall of the Conservative party in the immediate post-Thatcherite era demonstrates that contemporary British conservatism has been characterised by a failure of party statecraft'<sup>90</sup>.*

This particular viewpoint (with added hindsight), would therefore appear to draw a contrast between the key argument put forward by Bulpitt in the early 1980s that Thatcher's key political focus was the achievement and maintenance of 'statecraft' (rather than an ideological crusade), as well as Norton's analysis of the late 1980s that pragmatic party loyalists prevailed over the Thatcherite ideologues within the Conservative parliamentary ranks and maintained a responsible and moderating influence over the direction of governance in the process. The revised post-Thatcher viewpoint of Heppell and Hill suggests instead that Thatcher's over-emphasis on ideology and its associated rhetoric the longer she was in office ultimately eroded the potential for successful and sustained 'statecraft' and damaged the party's delicate internal equilibrium, and as a consequence the party's traditional unity was severely weakened. This in turn adversely affected its political fortunes in the long-term, culminating in the intra-party policy divisions of the 1990s and the electoral carnage of 1997 that led to thirteen long years in political opposition until 2010. This long-term Thatcherite legacy has therefore gone to the heart of the party's definitive ideological identity and emphasis, although the argument put forward by Andrew Gamble suggests that ideology could indeed complement competence in office and not be a substitute for it, stating that Thatcherism represented a revised version of party statecraft that sought to promote more explicit conservative ideological principles. However Gamble did acknowledge in the late 1980s that *'the short-term success of Thatcherite conservatism as an instrument of party statecraft would not be sustainable over the longer term'*<sup>91</sup>, an argument ostensibly vindicated in his 1995 analysis<sup>92</sup> which painted a more pessimistic picture of Conservative political fortunes.

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<sup>90</sup> Heppell, T. and Hill, M., 'Ideological Typologies of Contemporary British Conservatism', *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 3, p.335, (2005).

<sup>91</sup> See analysis of Gamble's theory by Heppell, T. and Hill, M., 'Ideological Typologies of Contemporary British Conservatism', (2005), *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 3, p.340

<sup>92</sup> See Andrew Gamble, 'The Crisis of Conservatism', *New Left Review*, (No.214, November-December 1995), <http://newleftreview.org/l/214/andrew-gamble-the-crisis-of-conservatism>



This debate over the importance and emphasis of ideology within British Conservatism has ultimately influenced the context of David Cameron's leadership since 2005, and specifically how his brand of post-Thatcherite 'modern' Conservatism ultimately comes to be defined in both social and economic policy terms as well as electoral performance. Cameron has therefore sought to pursue a delicate balancing act of utilising occasional Thatcherite rhetoric while simultaneously embracing a pragmatic position on various socio-economic issues and emphasising greater emphasis on a distinct model of community-based 'compassionate conservatism' (evident in 'The Big Society'), an approach aligned with more explicit public concern for the poorer members of society where it is considered politically expedient and appropriate<sup>93</sup>. This quixotic fusion of contrasting Conservative traditions has therefore often made Cameron's agenda elusive and difficult to attach a specific label to, being somewhat distinct from both the traditional left and right of the party's 'ideological' spectrum. This fundamental question of the relative importance and influence of ideology in relation to the formation of party policy is therefore a dynamic and significant area of contemporary socio-political debate, and in assessing the evolution of specific Conservative Party welfare and social policies over the period of Coalition government (from 2010 onwards) and in future years, political observers will continue to analyse to what extent such policy has been shaped by explicit ideology as opposed to the pragmatism of 'statecraft', or possibly a fusion of both.

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<sup>93</sup> See contrasting articles on this issue:

Toby Helm, *'Cameron says he is breaking with legacy of Thatcher'*, The Daily Telegraph, 2nd January 2006, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1506778/Cameron-says-he-is-breaking-with-legacy-of-Thatcher.html>

Rosa Prince, *'David Cameron praises Baroness Thatcher and vows to emulate her as PM'*, The Daily Telegraph, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/politics/conservative/4691260/David-Cameron-praises-Baroness-Thatcher-and-vows-to-emulate-her-as-PM.html>

## **The Impact of the 'New Right' on the Conservative Party's social policy agenda**

Following on from the initial chapter on ideology in a general and broader sense, this chapter seeks to explain and analyse the development and evolution of the specific 'New Right' ideology in its guise as a fairly contemporary and modern variant of Conservative political thought. As a viewpoint with a global context and influence, it sought to revive the values of the liberal 'free-market' economic environment of the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, while seeking to dismantle the post-1945 welfare settlement. This 'neo-liberal' economic outlook subsequently established itself as a distinct influence within the British Conservative Party during a specific period of its political dominance in the 1980s, rejecting much of the party's paternalistic social policy of the post-war period in the process. In therefore emphasising precisely what the beliefs and key principles of this specific brand of Conservatism are, it is necessary to analyse its origins and to assess how it has developed as a specific political concept within the modern political framework, along with how it focused and attached itself onto the British Conservative Party's policy-making agenda under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher from 1975 onwards. In particular, attention will be focused on how the New Right's ideological thrust influenced the welfare and social policies of the Thatcher government between 1979 and 1990, and how it potentially continues to influence party policy in this area to the present day.

### **The Origins of the New Right**

Having seized control of the direction of the Conservative Party in the mid-1970s, the challenge for the advocates of the 'New Right' was to craft and influence specific policies that could be implemented while in power, although this would be a significant challenge as Thatcher and her 'New Right' vanguard were only a minority clique of the wider parliamentary Conservative Party<sup>94</sup>, and far from politically secure in the early years of her leadership. Nevertheless, the Thatcherite or 'New Right' viewpoint heavily influenced the party's sustained spell in political office from 1979 and subsequently throughout the 1980s,

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<sup>94</sup> See Philip Norton, 'The Lady's Not For Turning: But What About The Rest?', *Margaret Thatcher And The Conservative Party (1979-1989)*, *Parliamentary Affairs* 43 (1990), <http://pa.oxfordjournals.org/content/43/1/41.full.pdf>

pushing the Conservative administration of the 1980s in a more explicitly ideological direction in comparison to the conventional pragmatism that many commentators and observers had associated with the party's approach to governance for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see chapter one). The particular historical period from 1979 onwards witnessed the ideological edge of the 'New Right' wielding increasing power and influence within British politics, absorbing popular support in the process and being clearly in the ascendancy in terms of public opinion and electoral support. The 'New Right' had emerged as a transatlantic political presence and was therefore increasingly influential on a global level from the mid-1970s onwards, ultimately reacting to both international and specifically domestic political and economic events with its own proposed policy remedies to address the various socio-economic problems of the time. It reflected a philosophical strand of both British and international (notably American) conservative thought that rejected the inherent structure of the post-war consensus in relation to the perceived excessive levels of state intervention and regulation of the mixed economy, along with the high levels of taxation and corporatist trade union power, and which argued instead for a smaller state and reduced taxation within a neo-liberal 'free-market' economic framework<sup>95</sup>. It was therefore argued by advocates of the 'New Right' perspective that only in such a neo-liberal framework could maximum wealth be both created and shared efficiently across society, free from the constraints of an interfering and repressive state, therefore creating a scenario where:

*'..... the less well-off are indirectly aided by the rich through the "trickle-down effect", whereby the expenditure and investment of the wealthy percolates downwards and outwards to the rest of society, and thereby generates employment and finances welfare provision'<sup>96</sup>.*

This viewpoint appeared to promote a greater meritocratic and entrepreneurial model of society, and despite its 'free-market' emphasis, it still acknowledged the need for some variant of a welfare state to exist, albeit a less vast and bureaucratic one. Under this 'New

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<sup>95</sup> See Raymond Plant, *The Neo-Liberal State*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009)

<sup>96</sup> Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics And Philosophy Of Inequality*, (I.B Tauris, London, 2011), Ch.1, p.45-6

Right' political vision therefore, welfare provision would be funded and moulded by the dynamism of the 'neo-liberal state' and its economy, but while it offered the prospect of greater organisational efficiency and less bureaucracy, as a consequence it would also be potentially less comprehensive, a negative implication for the more vulnerable members of society who generally use such services more often. Those on the political left have consistently questioned the effectiveness and fairness of such a free market focus and 'trickle-down' approach in spreading wealth and providing an effective welfare service in practical terms, and have ultimately argued that the neo-liberal economic and social model is in fundamental conflict with the more egalitarian vision as promoted and idealised by socialists and social democrats. The neo-liberal argument would certainly acknowledge that a more egalitarian model of society is not the likely outcome from such an economic structure (as developed further in chapter 3), but this is viewed as both a natural and desirable outcome of such economic liberalism, as the 'New Right' variant of conservatism views inequality as a natural state of affairs, as outlined below:

*'The (economic) liberal will therefore distinguish sharply between equality of rights and equality of opportunity, on the one hand, and material equality of equality of outcome on the other'<sup>97</sup>.*

This growing intellectual and theoretical influence culminated in a sustained period of political popularity and hegemony due to the perceived failures of the post-war 'social-democratic' model of a mixed economy, with 'New Right' politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher gaining a political foothold from the mid-1970s onwards and holding political power in the USA and Britain respectively for most of the 1980s. In this political context, during the 1980s the Thatcher government in Britain was heavily influenced and intellectually consolidated by the neo-liberal agenda of economists such as Milton Friedman and F.A Hayek<sup>98</sup>. Friedman was associated with the 'Chicago School' (University of

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<sup>97</sup> Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962), Ch.12, p.195

<sup>98</sup> Milton Friedman (1912-2006), US economist, associated with the 'Chicago School' of economics and in the development of the concept of monetarism. His key works were '*Capitalism and Freedom*' (1962), and '*Free to Choose*', (1980, & co-authored with his wife), which advocated the importance of economic capitalism as the most appropriate solution to problems that arise within modern post-war societies. Friedrich Hayek (1899-

Chicago)<sup>99</sup>, while Hayek was attached in academic terms to the 'Austrian School'<sup>100</sup>. Despite such varying geographical origins, both economists fundamentally rejected the Keynesian post-war economic settlement<sup>101</sup> that had been consolidated across much of the western world for approximately three decades since the mid-1940s, arguing that this 'social-democratic' model of the state represented a '*source of coercion*'<sup>102</sup> in relation to the autonomy of the individual citizen. They instead advocated economic de-regulation, greater promotion of 'free-market' capitalism and its associated culture of enhanced individual economic liberalism and personal freedoms. The international works of Friedman and Hayek in turn influenced Thatcher's own British sources of ideological and political inspiration and prophecy, notably Enoch Powell, described by one commentator as '*the heretical voice of the fifties and sixties*'<sup>103</sup> in terms of questioning the post-war consensus. As a primary British source of Thatcher's political agenda, Powell espoused a devout and idealized faith in a society influenced by the principles of economic liberalism, genuinely believing that due to the 'statist' nature of the post-war settlement, there was subsequently a growing and real threat as '*to whether a free society was to survive in Britain or be destroyed by socialism*'<sup>104</sup>. Powell's vocal and sustained critique of the post-war consensus was bolstered by the Institute of Economic Affairs<sup>105</sup> (IEA, founded 1955 under the considerable influence of Hayek), and which sought to challenge the Keynesian post-war settlement. This body was bolstered by the emergence the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS)<sup>106</sup> in 1974, co-founded by Sir Keith Joseph, Alfred Sherman and Margaret Thatcher, who established it as '*an institutional base for the dissemination of (their) revisionist agenda*'<sup>107</sup> that sought to challenge the post-

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1992), author of the '*Road to Serfdom*' (1944) which warned of the dangers to individualism of excessive state power, and associated with the '*Austrian School*' of political economy.

<sup>99</sup> See David C. Green, *The New Right: The Counter-Revolution in Political, Economic and Social Thought*, (Wheatsheaf Books, Brighton, 1987), Ch.3

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., Ch.5

<sup>101</sup> The economic theories of the English economist John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946), who in the 1930s and 40s in particular emphasised the notion of a government spending beyond its budget during a recession in order to stimulate business investment and overall economic growth.

<sup>102</sup> David C. Green, *The New Right: The Counter-Revolution in Political, Economic and Social Thought*, (Wheatsheaf Books, Brighton, 1987), Ch.3, p.74

<sup>103</sup> Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, (Fontana, London, 1992), Ch.3, p.74

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., Ch.3, p.74

<sup>105</sup> Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), a free-market think-tank:

<http://www.iea.org.uk/>

<sup>106</sup> The Centre for Policy Studies (CPS), an independent but arguably right-leaning think-tank:

<http://www.cps.org.uk/>

<sup>107</sup> Robert M. Page, 'The Conservative Party and the Welfare State since 1945', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.2, p.31

war political consensus. Such bodies promoting economic liberalism would challenge the cost and scope of the British welfare state and its various policies, an increasingly relevant issue in an era of growing economic difficulties. Powell's rhetoric alongside the pamphlets, seminars and publications of both the IEA from the 1960s onwards, and Joseph's CPS from the mid-1970s, subsequently set the scene for 'Thatcherism' to emerge as a credible political entity within British politics:

*'Arguably, Keith Joseph did as much as any other single person around the world to reshape the debate about government and marketplace, to take a variety of ideas and bind them together into a powerful critique of the mixed economy and, in the course of things, help shape them into a political programme. That agenda, in turn, was articulated and put into effect by his most important student, Margaret Thatcher. She made the ideas "happen."'*<sup>108</sup>

Thatcher's administration therefore sought to practically develop this socio-economic blueprint and subsequently aimed to steer Britain in a new and distinct 'neo-liberal' political direction, offering a stark contrast to the bulk of the historical period since 1945, which was essentially an era that had been anchored in the apparent certainties of the Keynesian analysis of post-war economics and society. However, such certainties had become distorted and undermined by major global and domestic economic failings by the late 1970s, and Thatcher sought to challenge them with her own brand of 'conviction' politics. However Thatcher's own ideological certainties were not explicitly present from the outset of her period in office and would develop further as her confidence and political power grew as the 1980s progressed. She was however guided by some fundamental certainties from the outset that would shape her political legacy to the present day:

*'Thatcher believed that modern Conservatism was barely distinguishable from the social-democratic path forged by successive post-war Labour governments. In her*

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<sup>108</sup> Extract from Excerpt from Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw, (ed.), *The Commanding Heights*, p. 92-105 (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1998), [http://www-tc.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/shared/pdf/prof\\_keithjoseph.pdf](http://www-tc.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/shared/pdf/prof_keithjoseph.pdf)  
See also Keith Joseph and Jonathan Sumption, *Equality*, (W & J MacKay, Chatham, 1979)

*view, Britain had lost its economic dynamism and, as a consequence, a culture of decline and dependency had been allowed to take hold*<sup>109</sup>.

Yet in pursuing the approach to governance that it did, this post-1979 administration had to formulate, develop and implement some crucial and distinctly original policy decisions as Britain reached a critical socio-economic crossroads in terms of the sustainability of its long-term levels of taxation, public spending and overall public service and welfare provision. In therefore seeking to transcend and move the country on from a period viewed by the 'New Right' as being stagnant and regressive in its entrenched left-of-centre socio-economic agenda, Thatcher desired to lead a crusading and more ideological administration that would revolutionise the direction and emphasis of policy-making in the UK, dragging the gravity of British politics back to the right-of-centre from its perceived social-democratic predominance in the process. By enthusiastically embracing this 'New Right' approach to governance and providing a much more economic-centric edge to the government's policy agenda in the process, in later years Thatcher would subsequently be described as *'the most controversial prime minister in post-war British history'*<sup>110</sup>, primarily due to the way that her ideological crusade vehemently rejected the post-war consensus and radically shook up the existing political order from the early 1980s onwards.

Within a distinctly British political context, the 'New Right' movement ultimately evolved as a potent political force in a typically conservative pragmatic and circumstantial manner, as its emergence and prominence as a key influence within the British political sphere was *'not originally an ideological conversion but more a response to events'*<sup>111</sup>. The 'events' that the British New Right variant sought to respond to was the tumultuous climax of the sustained 'years of consensus' from 1945 and which had dominated the political landscape for approximately thirty years. However, there was a growing mood emerging in the 1970s that post-war British governments of all political persuasions broadly taxed and spent too much, had failed to address Britain's post-war economic decline and industrial

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<sup>109</sup> Robert M. Page, 'The Conservative Party and the Welfare State since 1945', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.2, p.31

<sup>110</sup> Alan Sked and Chris Cook, *Post War Britain: A Political History* (Penguin, London, 4<sup>th</sup> edn., 1993), Ch.12, p.328

<sup>111</sup> Norman Barry, 'New Right', cited in Kevin Hickson (ed.), *The Political Thought of the Conservative Party since 1945*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.2, p.34

inefficiencies, and that the 'corporatist' nature of trade union power was out of control. This led some to label the country as '*the sick man of Europe*'<sup>112</sup> and such a mood came to a shattering crescendo in the winter of 1978/79, when rampant trade unionism heralded the 'Winter of Discontent' and the apparent crippling of the British system of government, with even prominent Labour figures acknowledging the alienation of public opinion in the process:

*'Garbage piled up and rotted in this streets.....picketing and closure of schools, and.....action preventing the burial of the dead, affronted the nation'*<sup>113</sup>.

This scenario appeared to vindicate the alternative political and economic agenda espoused by the 'New Right' thinkers of the period such as Keith Joseph, and as a consequence of such sustained industrial and economic disruption, a significant public backlash was evident in the 1979 General Election when the Conservatives were elected on a higher than average swing<sup>114</sup>, with Labour punished for its trade union links and its association with high 'tax and spend' policies. The specific policy-making agenda and political priorities of the incoming government from 1979 onwards was therefore focused on the development of innovative policies to instigate a long-term restructuring of the British model of government from its traditional post-war collectivist appearance, and instead moved in the direction of a more individualist overall structure. Such a political and socio-economic vision was shaped by some initial ideology but also influenced by the vagaries of circumstance:

*'Thatcherite policies did not spring out of nothing. The way was prepared for them by a confluence of ideas, activities and circumstances'*<sup>115</sup>.

In particular, such circumstances derived from the perceived expense and inefficiencies within the size and scope of the post-war state that had been identified from

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<sup>112</sup> See Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, (Harper-Collins, London, 1993)

<sup>113</sup> Harold Wilson, *Final Term: The Labour Government 1974-1976*, (Michael Joseph, London, 1979), Epilogue, p.241

<sup>114</sup> The swing of 5.2% from Labour to the Conservatives was the biggest change in public opinion between elections since 1945, suggesting a notable shift in public support away from the post-war consensus.

<sup>115</sup> Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, (Fontana, London, 1992), Ch.3, p.49



the vantage point of the New Right's perspective in political opposition from 1974 onwards, bolstered by the work of Joseph, the IEA and CPS, etc. Now with its recently-acquired and notable influence over the party leadership, from the mid-1970s the radical 'New Right' identified the ever-growing and increasingly expensive welfare state as an area that needed significant reform and retrenchment in the context of the industrial unrest and negative economic growth of the 1970s. This political approach marked '*a major departure from the political consensus on welfare.....(and) also a fundamental change of direction for the Conservatives*'<sup>116</sup>, who had previously supported its somewhat bloated and bureaucratic existence for the majority of the post-war 'consensus' period. Many within the 'New Right' were therefore clearly sceptical and even contemptuous of the scale of British welfare provision, increasingly identifying it with Britain's sustained post-war economic difficulties. Such an attitude would ultimately have significant implications for the traditionally bipartisan approach in maintaining the generous image of the post-war British welfare state, and in adopting such an approach, the Thatcher administration sought to transform Britain from the epoch of consensus politics that had been dominant for the post-war era, with the premier making '*no secret of her dislike of political consensus between the parties*'<sup>117</sup> that had existed for much of the post-war period<sup>118</sup>. Such an attitude applied to the issue of the welfare state along with many other aspects of post-1945 British politics, and in this context, the 'New Right' Thatcherite crusade should be understood as '*a libertarian project bent on destroying the "liberal consensus"*'<sup>119</sup> within British politics and society. This notably different agenda simultaneously sought to erode what it perceived to be a dormant period of post-war history by pursuing a contrasting ethos for governance that aligned '*the notion of conviction with the metaphor of movement and direction*'<sup>120</sup>. This was in order to instil the necessary dynamism and broader electoral appeal into the Conservative Party's political

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<sup>116</sup> C. Collette & K. Laybourn, *Modern Britain Since 1979*, (I.B. Tauris, London, 2003), Ch.1, p.8

<sup>117</sup> Stephen J. Lee, *Aspects of British Political History 1914-1995* (Routledge, Oxford, 1996), Ch.15, p.229

<sup>118</sup> In 1980 Margaret Thatcher made the following comments about 'consensus' politics which appeared to typify her views on this matter:

*"To me consensus appears to be: the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies in search of something in which no-one believes".*

Speech at Monash University (6<sup>th</sup> October, 1981 Sir Robert Menzies Lecture, Melbourne, Australia), cited in Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, (Harper-Collins, London, 1993), Ch.6, p.167, see also:

Margaret Thatcher Foundation:

<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104712>

<sup>119</sup> Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, (Fontana, London, 1992), Ch.1, p.23

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch.2, p.29

agenda from 1979 onwards, as argued by Letwin's notion of the 'vigorous virtues' that were an essential component of the Thatcher policy agenda<sup>121</sup>. Such a conviction-based 'libertarian' angle emphasised greater economic freedoms and a reduced role for the state as a result.

### **The Economic Implications of the New Right policy agenda**

Consequently the overall thrust of policy-making after 1979 appeared to take on a greater economic focus as opposed to a social one, although there were explicit social and welfare policy implications for an economic approach tinged with such a distinctly 'New Right' and neo-liberal flavour. Due to the concerns of both the 'New Right' and moderate left in relation to the long-term rising costs of the overall British welfare state by the mid-1970s, the development and innovation of social and welfare policy was often downgraded and initially overlooked as a policy priority by the incoming government from 1979. During the period from 1945 to the mid-1970s, there was broad bipartisan agreement on the levels of public spending and investment in social policies and public services, and within this context, from a long-term UK perspective the years since World War Two witnessed the state taking on a gradually increased degree of social responsibility for British citizens, reflected in progressively increased levels of welfare provision. This in turn led to enhanced levels of government spending and economic activity to support extended social policies, and as a consequence of such trends during this historical period UK government spending as a percentage of GDP steadily grew until it reached a peak of 48.9% in 1975<sup>122</sup>. This zenith of government expenditure prompted the Labour government of James Callaghan to acknowledge that Keynesian economics linked to an ever-growing state and its associated generous and costly range of social policies was no longer economically viable or sustainable for the foreseeable future<sup>123</sup>, even before the advent of Thatcherism in office.

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<sup>121</sup> See Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, (Fontana, London, 1992), Ch.2

<sup>122</sup> Source:

<http://www.ukpublicspending.co.uk/>

<sup>123</sup> At the 1976 Labour Party Conference, Prime Minister James Callaghan said:

*"We used to think that you could spend your way out of recession by cutting taxes and increasing government spending. I tell you in all candour that this option no longer exists"*, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1976, cited in Kevin Hickson, *The IMF crisis of 1976 and British Politics*, (I.B Tauris, London, 2005) p.103

Margaret Thatcher's administration ultimately had an ideology-driven political strategy, despite the party's traditional aversion to such an approach to governance. From this perspective it was shaped by a coherent set of ideas and primarily focused on the perceived need to tackle such fundamental and deep-rooted structural economic problems, a side-effect of the generous welfare provision that had become more prominent as the post-war years had progressed. Yet according to one commentator, such an economic emphasis did not mean that Thatcherism was only about economics, but was rather:

*'not so much an economic policy as a way of doing economic policy- or, more precisely, a way of not doing economic policy'*<sup>124</sup>.

The Thatcher government with its New Right hue subsequently placed a greater emphasis on developing and radically restructuring economic policies (a distinct approach from the mainstream post-war era) in order to address and tackle the high-spending social policies of successive governments of previous decades, and such an emphasis on financial retrenchment appeared to relegate the scope and potential for social policy innovation in the process. Social policy and economics certainly fuse in many areas of contemporary global politics, particularly so in welfare provision whereby the scale, cost and overall scope of welfare services are often inherently linked to the health of the contemporary economy. It has therefore been a recurring challenge of modern British political administrations to achieve a satisfactory balance between these different nuances within the overall policy-making process, and socio-economic priorities and agenda will often change as governments change, as subsequent governments in the post-Thatcher era have proven. The 'New Right' emphasis on economics could still be clearly seen in one of its first major forays into British social policy, when the Thatcher government abolished the link between pensions and earnings in 1980, a move that appeared to be primarily motivated by economic factors rather than social ones, namely as a means of saving money.

Thatcherite critics of Keynesianism claimed that it had served its purpose in promoting a short-term stimulus to encourage post-war recovery, but in the long-term it

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<sup>124</sup> Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, (Fontana, London, 1992), Ch.5, p.125

simply increased levels of taxation, inflation, and public spending as an overall percentage of GDP, all of which are factors that restrict long-term economic growth according to the monetarist perspective. As a consequence, by the advent of the 1980s Britain's post-war economic performance had been sluggish compared to other western nations, and according to the 'New Right' analysis, this had restricted the scope and effectiveness of social and welfare policies, primarily due to reasons of economic inefficiency. In general political terms therefore, social policy programmes and priorities could be broadly moulded and influenced by various economic forces and conditions at a particular period in time, and such economic pressure was certainly evident in determining the scale of social policy expenditure of the Labour government (1974-9), particularly in its twilight phase following the significant cutbacks imposed following the IMF's intervention in 1976<sup>125</sup>. This period marked the end of the so-called 'Golden Age' of economic growth<sup>126</sup>, initially sparked by the 1973 global oil crisis and culminating in rising unemployment, surging inflation and significant cuts in UK public spending and areas of social and welfare policy in the late 1970s, which in turn prompted the 'Winter of Discontent' and the emergence of 'New Right' theories into the realities of political power.

As a reaction to such global socio-economic developments and trends that were increasingly evident the 1970s progressed, the New Right's advocates enthusiastically promoted monetarist theory (as espoused by its founding father Milton Friedman<sup>127</sup>), and in doing so sought to generate significant hostility to unnecessary government 'interference', evident in excessive 'welfarism', high levels of public expenditure, rising levels of inflation and significant economic regulation. As an economic theory, it therefore ostensibly offered a less 'statist' approach and alternatively pursued a greater emphasis on 'marketisation', generating greater fiscal and monetary flexibility in the process for those governments that adhered to its principles, and in adopting this approach the Thatcher government endorsed a '*neo-liberal ideological assault on the post-war settlement*'<sup>128</sup>. This viewpoint ultimately argued that instead of targeting zero unemployment (as the prevailing post-war social-

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<sup>125</sup> See Kevin Hickson, *The IMF crisis of 1976 and British Politics*, (I.B Tauris, London, 2005)

<sup>126</sup> See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, (Michael Joseph, London, 1994)

<sup>127</sup> See Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962)

<sup>128</sup> Nick Ellison, 'The Conservative Party and Public Expenditure', Ch.3, p.48, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011)

democratic model of governance had done), the market would determine a natural rate of unemployment and inflation would instead be prioritised, ultimately reducing the scope of the government's traditional role in post-war economic management, which had consequences for social and welfare policy provision in the process. In this context, the New Right's influence sought to '*nurture the values and attitudes needed to maintain capitalism in the new circumstances*'<sup>129</sup>, with such circumstances being the acknowledgement of the failure of post-war Keynesian economics, exacerbated by the impact of the globalised slump on the British economy. Within such a context, Friedman's monetarist doctrine therefore claimed that by rejecting interventionist and '*futile attempts to push unemployment to zero (it would) no longer trigger inflationary spirals*'<sup>130</sup>, and the fact that such sentiments appeared to be shared by both the incumbent British Labour Prime Minister and a neo-liberal economist within the same era seemed to affirm that there were severe implications for the long-term sustainability of the post-war model of social policy delivery due to such a diagnosis. The New Right's agenda argued that the basic framework of Britain's economy needed to be drastically revised and its welfare scope reduced in order to ensure a more effective and efficient management in the future. Inflation peaked at 26% during the mid-1970s and according to the analysis of the 'New Right' this was primarily due to decades of post-war economic intervention, with the government sustaining and subsidising inefficient industries and surplus jobs in the name of social harmony, but often in defiance of the demands of the free-market. This is a lesson that appeared to have been digested by Margaret Thatcher's administration from an early stage of its existence:

*'For the growing number of Conservative neo-liberals, emboldened intellectually by the ideas and critiques adumbrated by the New Right, many of the economic problems being experienced by Britain during the 1970s..... were a consequence of successive post-war governments, Conservative and Labour alike, not allowing "the market" to function freely'*<sup>131</sup>.

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<sup>129</sup> Shirley Robin Letwin. *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, (Fontana, London, 1992), Ch.1, p.20

<sup>130</sup> 'Milton Friedman: An Enduring Legacy', *The Economist*, November 17<sup>th</sup> 2006, [http://www.economist.com/node/8190872?story\\_id=8190872](http://www.economist.com/node/8190872?story_id=8190872)

<sup>131</sup> Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics And Philosophy Of Inequality*, (I.B Tauris, London, 2011), Ch.3, p.134

This suggested that a radically different 'free-market' approach to economic management and policy-making would be pursued from 1979 onwards, and the Thatcherite reaction to the spiralling socio-economic trend of inflation that peaked in the mid-1970s was to explicitly reject the interventionist and statist nature of the Keynesian doctrine, and instead preach a return to liberal economics of the 'Victorian era', in line with Thatcher's overall adherence to Victorian social and economic values of thrift and self-help. In this context, 'Thatcherism' represented a firm view that the basic economic policies and principles associated with the social democratic model of government that had dominated post-war Britain had to be rejected '*in order to relaunch Britain as a successful capitalist economy*'<sup>132</sup>, and in doing so the Thatcher administration represented a 'New Right' reaction that was vigorous in its ideological backlash to the socio-economic conditions of the time. From this specific political perspective it was '*a necessary response to the perilous state Britain was in prior to Thatcher's electoral victory in 1979*'<sup>133</sup>, and this required a '*free economy and a strong state*', as described within Andrew Gamble's notable analysis of the New Right agenda<sup>134</sup>, with its fusion of economic liberalism and social conservatism. Such a marked change of government direction, with a distinct and contrasting political outlook from what had gone before triggered a clear shift towards fiscal retrenchment, marketisation and streamlining of public services and a significant review of overall government spending levels. This approach has been summarised by Gamble as requiring a 'strong state' to instil the necessary structural framework that allows a government to impose its values and political tendencies, but at the same time allow capitalism to flourish by seeking to actively '*unwind the coils of social democracy and welfarism that had fastened around the free economy*'<sup>135</sup>. Indeed, Gamble's interpretation of the New Right's key aims is that a strong state is an essential factor for capitalism to work at its most beneficial and effective, being '*dynamic and productive*' yet still reliant '*upon institutions that the market*

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<sup>132</sup> See Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and The Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1988), cited in Shirley Robin Letwin. *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, (Fontana, London, 1992), Ch.1, p.20

<sup>133</sup> Norman Barry, 'New Right', cited in Kevin Hickson (ed.), *The Political Thought of the Conservative Party since 1945*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.2, p.28

<sup>134</sup> See Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and The Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1988)

<sup>135</sup> Andrew Gamble, '*The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*', (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1994), Ch.2, p.40

*itself cannot generate spontaneously..... (leaving) a major role for government*<sup>136</sup>. The new Prime Minister from 1979 onwards clearly sought to rebalance the distinctly Keynesian slant of the political consensus that had been firmly established in the years following 1945, and in doing so the state was required to play a key role in fashioning the appropriate socio-economic conditions and political structures. The post-war model of social democratic government was therefore condemned by the New Right acolytes as being fundamentally flawed, being a system that was *'alien to the Thatcherites..... To them, Keynesianism was anathema'*<sup>137</sup>. This would have drastic implications for social and welfare policies in particular, and from this 'New Right' perspective the creaking socio-economic structure of Britain needed to be radically altered and from the most radical Thatcherite perspective, perhaps even needing to be dismantled and re-built in a completely new guise. It was in this context that the 1980s witnessed *'concerted attempts..... to refashion the welfare state'*<sup>138</sup>.

### **The New Right's Influence on Margaret Thatcher and her social policies in office**

This socio-economic environment allowed Margaret Thatcher to initiate a range of scathing economic cutbacks in public spending as part of her 'monetarist experiment' from 1979 onwards, a key and novel dimension to her 'New Right' agenda during her early years in power. By the start of the 1980s, immediate short-term social consequences of such an austere approach to reducing the cost and scope of public service provision were fairly severe in terms of social unrest. It therefore appears that the clearest evidence of a correlation between economic and social policy can be seen when extreme economic pressures or a period of recession put strains on the maintenance and ongoing funding of key social policies within the overall structure of the welfare state and its associated services and provisions. Therefore, when such severe economic factors lead to cutbacks in the funding of welfare and social policies, there are often potentially serious social repercussions. Subsequently, in the aftermath of Chancellor of the Exchequer Geoffrey Howe's controversial 1981 'retrenchment' Budget in particular, the extent of such discord

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<sup>136</sup> Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1994, Ch.2, p.44

<sup>137</sup> Ian Gilmour, *Dancing With Dogma: Britain Under Thatcherism*, (Simon & Schuster, London, 1992), Ch.2, p.14

<sup>138</sup> Robert M. Page, 'The Conservative Party and the Welfare State since 1945', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.2, p.38

that followed was such that *'throughout 1981, Britain was a country nowhere near to being at peace with itself,*<sup>139</sup> with many inner-cities such as Liverpool, Bristol and London erupting and providing the backdrop to extreme and destructive rioting and social unrest, reflecting the mood of dissent among poorer social groups towards the sharp reductions in government spending programmes. Accordingly, the more moderate 'One Nation' faction of the Conservative Party were alarmed at such direct and brutal social implications of Thatcherism, claiming that on two fronts, *'economically and socially, the government was steering for the rocks- and hit them'*<sup>140</sup>, their fears appearing to materialise with *'Riots in Brixton a month after the budget and in Toxteth in July showed they had good reason to be worried'*<sup>141</sup>. Such fears of widening social unrest contrasted sharply with the views of the Thatcherite 'New Right' ministers within government, most prominently Norman Tebbit, who in the midst of such escalating unemployment and social disharmony proclaimed that:

*"I grew up in the '30s with an unemployed father. He didn't riot. He got on his bike and looked for work, and he kept looking 'til he found it"*<sup>142</sup>.

This less sympathetic Thatcherite (New Right) reaction to such social unrest therefore contrasted sharply with the 'One Nation' Conservative viewpoint, and such differences marked a key fracture within the Conservative Party of this period in relation to economic policy and its social consequences. There has been much political debate as to whether the early phase of Conservative government from 1979 merited more failure than success (on various levels), and political commentators and academics ranging from Willetts to Letwin have appeared to identify this initial period of Thatcher's Conservative administration as clear proof that the government was pursuing a 'New Right' inspired policy agenda that was *'above all, economic'*<sup>143</sup>. As a consequence social policy, social issues and broader welfare reform were seen as relatively neglected and even expendable in some cases in the name of initially balancing the books and achieving greater long-term economic

<sup>139</sup> Hugo Young, *One of Us*, (Pan Macmillan, London, 1989), Ch.12, p.239

<sup>140</sup> Ian Gilmour, *Dancing With Dogma: Britain Under Thatcherism*, (Simon & Schuster, London, 1992), Ch.3, p.48

<sup>141</sup> Larry Elliott, *'Budget 2010: George Osborne's austerity package haunted by spectre of 1981'*, The Guardian, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2010,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/jun/22/budget-budget-deficit>

<sup>142</sup> Norman Tebbit, Speech to the Annual Conservative Party Conference, Blackpool (15th October, 1981)

<sup>143</sup> David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, (Penguin, London, 1992), Ch.4. p.55



efficiency. As Letwin argues when she refers to the 'vigorous virtues', such an emphasis on economic liberalism and dynamism grew in its boldness and ideological vigour the longer Thatcher was in power, and it was during her second term (1983-87) that her definitive socio-economic agenda became most evident in its more economic slant, as her overall policy focus became *'increasingly committed to the privatisation of public services and the reduction of public expenditure..... on the welfare state'*<sup>144</sup>. Margaret Thatcher's primary economic focus is often epitomised by the statement she made in the wake of her third election victory in 1987 that *"There is no such thing as society"*<sup>145</sup>, a phrase used out of its full context but which nevertheless appeared to emphasise her focus on economic individualism as opposed to a more prominent social agenda. However, those who worked closely with her during this period do not accept that social policy was abandoned to the extent that critics have claimed, as explained below:

*'In her early days..... (she was) pre-occupied with the economy and industrial relations and she turned to social policy in the mid-80s when welfare reform and then education became a priority. So it is true that it wasn't a priority early on, but it became more of a priority later..... there was a caricature of Thatcher that came from the notorious 'Woman's Own' quote- she was not really saying that she rejected society, she really attempted to correct a misapprehension about her views on society'*<sup>146</sup>.

Despite such a determined defence of her attitudes and outlook regarding social policy matters, there have continued to be critical academic interpretations of the Conservative Party's record in this broad policy area during the 1980s, re-enforcing the perception that Conservatives of the New Right variant were *'not interested in society, and were merely concerned with economics'*<sup>147</sup>, culminating in the socio-economic outcome that *'under-funding on public services was one of the key legacies of Conservative social policy in*

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<sup>144</sup> C. Collette & K. Laybourn, *Modern Britain Since 1979*, (I.B Tauris, London, 2003), Ch.1, p.9

<sup>145</sup> Margaret Thatcher, interview with 'Woman's Own Magazine', published 31<sup>st</sup> October 1987.

Source- Margaret Thatcher Foundation:

<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>

<sup>146</sup> David Willetts MP, interview with author, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012

<sup>147</sup> Richard Hayton, 'Conservative Party Modernisation and David Cameron's Politics of the Family', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol.81, No.4, (October-December 2010), p.494-5

the 1980s and 1990s'.<sup>148</sup> There were however of course clear social consequences to the revolutionary economic policies pursued by the Thatcher government, often perceived as being negative, which again emphasises the intrinsic symbiotic link and overlap between economic and social and welfare policies in most models of contemporary politics. According to one contemporary Conservative activist looking back at this period, the need for radical medicine to the British economy meant that *'the inevitable consequence of this was that social policy took rather more of a back seat than perhaps it should. The generalised perception of Conservative welfare and social policy throughout this period is thus probably negative'*<sup>149</sup>. Having acknowledged such negative perceptions however, there were nevertheless tensions within the New Right itself between the Conservative neo-liberals who wanted more radically de-regulated public services and those of a more authoritarian nature who favoured maintaining a 'strong state' as alluded to by Andrew Gamble. There were ultimately some distinct flagship social policies that emerged from such ideological tensions, an example being the acceleration of council house sales that proved to be very popular with many voters<sup>150</sup>. However, with welfare and social policies ultimately directly affected (often in an adverse way) by the government's desire to shrink both the size and scope of its economic footprint, this would arguably set a precedent for future Conservative administrations in the pursuit of restructuring and reforming welfare and social policy while cutting public spending, with potential parallels evident in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition administration that took office with an explicit 'retrenchment' agenda in May 2010.

Some Conservative figures of the moderate 'One Nation' wing, a faction of the party that was steadily overlooked and sidelined during the Thatcher period, have indeed acknowledged the apparent downgrading of social policy during this era, regretfully commenting on how it was in fact unfairly sidelined and somewhat neglected:

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<sup>148</sup> Stephen Driver, "'Fixing our Broken Society": David Cameron's Post-Thatcherite Social Policy', cited in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2009), Ch.6, p.82

<sup>149</sup> Carl Cross, Chairman of Merseyside Conservative Party (2009-12), E-mail questionnaire to author, 4<sup>th</sup> March 2011

<sup>150</sup> The Housing Act of 1980 allowed council tenants to buy their council properties at much reduced discount rates ('right to buy'). It became established as one of the most popular and distinct 'Thatcherite' policies. See: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1980/51>

*'We do not make enough of our social record..... Why not develop our ideas about choice and better provision as a genuine social policy we are proud of?'*<sup>151</sup>

It ultimately transpired that the need to secure a restructured economic model that would deliver a specific kind of long-term stability was awarded greater political emphasis during the 1980s, but the focus on providing greater choice within social policy would nevertheless develop as the decade progressed and would significantly shape post-Thatcher Conservative thinking (and indeed wider politics) within this policy sphere. During the 1980s such a focused emphasis on economic restructuring as the primary medicine for addressing society's deep-rooted problems remained more obviously to the forefront of government policy direction, although despite this, it has been argued by academics such as Howard Glennerster that the Thatcher decade *'was a decisive one for social policy'*, although it was only after she had departed from office in 1990 that *'distinctive legislative changes were placed on the statute book'*<sup>152</sup>. However, despite this suggestion that social policy and related welfare issues were somewhat revitalised under John Major's administration from 1990-97, it has been acknowledged in the midst of this post-Thatcher period that it remained a low priority in policy terms and that future party leaders would have to grapple with it much more earnestly:

*'The new theme of more fundamental change in Britain's welfare state..... will fall to the younger generation of Conservatives to elaborate'*<sup>153</sup>.

This line of analysis will certainly have struck a chord with the Conservative politicians and 'modernisers' of David Cameron's ilk, who having surveyed the wreckage of the 1997 general election defeat gradually sought to steer the Party back on the road to electability and a wider public appeal. This focus on the need for a refreshed and more attractive social policy agenda has marked a revised interpretation of the New Right's legacy in terms a

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<sup>151</sup> Chris Patten, Interview with Hugo Young, 18 April 1991, cited in *The Hugo Young Papers: A Journalist's Notes from the Heart of Politics*, Ion Trewin (ed.), (Penguin, London, 2009), p.325

<sup>152</sup> Howard Glennerster, 'Health and Social Policy', cited in Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *The Major Effect*, (Macmillan, London, 1994), Ch.18. p.320

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., Ch.18. p.330

practical and long-term welfare policy focus, and this has particularly resonated with David Cameron's leadership agenda from late 2005 onwards.

### **Modern Conservatism and links to the New Right Legacy**

Such an historical example of how the New Right tradition explicitly influenced the last sustained period of Conservative government and how it in turn created clear divisions between different sections of the Conservative Party has had contemporary repercussions in terms of how the party should function in office while implementing its policy-making agenda from 2010 onwards. Fears of repeated scenes of social unrest have been expressed in the context of the proposed economic cutbacks in 2010-11 to deal with Britain's large economic deficit<sup>154</sup>, with similarly negative implications predicted for the implementation and delivery of social policy across the country. However such internal party divisions and tensions have perhaps initially been less apparent amidst the scenes of public unrest in response to the economic retrenchment imposed to tackle the national deficit from 2010 onwards, e.g. over the protests at student tuition fees increases in late 2010. However, the extreme social unrest and rioting of summer 2011 (arguably linked to significant reductions in government spending)<sup>155</sup>, may have more significant implications for the social policy agenda for the remainder of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition's time in office, with some more moderate Conservatives and Liberal Democrats fearful of the potential unrest that could be caused by ongoing draconian cuts to key public services.

While such gloomy and pessimistic contemporary parallels with the 1981 Budget have been highlighted by many on the left of the political and academic spectrum following the post-2010 economic cutbacks, the 'New Right' interpretation of events offers the alternative viewpoint that on a purely economic and fiscally responsible level, *'The budget of 1981 is considered the epitome of soundness, an exercise in rigour that laid the*

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<sup>154</sup> David Burrows, 'IMF and police warn of social unrest', Daily Finance, 14<sup>th</sup> September 2010, <http://www.dailyfinance.co.uk/2010/09/14/imf-and-police-warn-of-social-unrest/>

<sup>155</sup> Jacopo Ponticelli and Hans-Joachim Voth, 'Fact: There is a link between cuts and riots', Comment is Free, The Guardian, 16<sup>th</sup> August 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/aug/16/austerity-programmes-cause-riots>

*foundations for the strong economic recovery*<sup>156</sup>. This budget can therefore be viewed as of one of this historical period's most significant socio-economic developments and is an episode used as a benchmark by the 'New Right' and the 'fiscal' Conservatives of the present day, offering a blueprint for Conservative administrations in how to deal with tough economic conditions and implementing the necessary measures of retrenchment while maintaining stable overall governance. Indeed many Conservative politicians within the coalition government from 2010 onwards would ultimately aspire to similar concerted and high-profile efforts to balance the books over the course of the 2010-15 administration, hoping to create a similarly restructured economy and accompanying socio-economic change in the early years of the new century<sup>157</sup>. It has however been noted by various political commentators that David Cameron appears to be the first Conservative Party Leader since 1997 who has sought to place more explicit focus on the need to acknowledge and address the social implications of the neo-liberal economic model in a way that the Thatcher regime perhaps did not:

*'Cameron's emphasis on social issues was intended to demonstrate that, notwithstanding his continued support for the neo-liberal economic agenda..... he accepted that the party had ignored the adverse social consequences that accompanied such radical social change'*<sup>158</sup>.

Cameron's revised focus on the social implications of neo-liberal economics and a smaller state may however sit uncomfortably next to the social unrest witnessed across

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<sup>156</sup> Larry Elliott, 'Budget 2010: George Osborne's austerity package haunted by spectre of 1981', The Guardian, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2010,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/jun/22/budget-budget-deficit>

<sup>157</sup> In February 2009, David Cameron drew parallels with the economic challenges that he was likely to face as Prime Minister with those faced by Margaret Thatcher in 1979:

*"I think we are at a time particularly with the economy where it is clear that difficult decisions are going to have to be taken. I think that influence, that character she (Thatcher) had, that conviction she had, I think that will be very important. Some of the things she said about the importance of living within your means, of not spending money you don't have, about cutting your cloth was wise then and it is wise now. Perhaps we need to listen to that again."*

Cited from Rosa Prince, 'David Cameron praises Baroness Thatcher and vows to emulate her as PM', The Daily Telegraph, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2009,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/politics/conservative/4691260/David-Cameron-praises-Baroness-Thatcher-and-vows-to-emulate-her-as-PM.html>

<sup>158</sup> Robert M. Page, 'The Conservative Party and the Welfare State since 1945', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.2, p.35

Britain in the middle of 2011. David Cameron's attitude on this subject has appeared to blur the extent of his Conservative identity, given that he has consistently expressed a 'One Nation' style paternalistic concern for the poorer members of society, but has also acknowledged the need for significant economic cutbacks aligned with the 'New Right's' general analysis, broadly adhering to the neo-liberal economic model. There ultimately appears to be some inconsistency and a sense of paradox within the Cameron socio-economic prescription, and how this circle can be squared in policy terms during the course of his premiership remains unclear, and will perhaps evolve further in the face of events and circumstances.

### **The Long-term Social and Political Consequences of the 'New Right' Policy Agenda**

Given such an unconvincing and somewhat uncertain legacy in the sphere of social and welfare policy from the 1980s onwards, the Conservative Party's more explicit economy-focused approach employed during this period ultimately had some harsh consequences in terms of broader social harmony, evident in the social unrest throughout the period such as the inner-city riots of 1981, the Miners' Strike of 1984-5 and the poll tax protests of 1989-90. In this context and as a modern-day comparison, parallels can be made between the policy priorities of the early phase of Conservative government from 1979 onwards and also the proposed economic cutbacks of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition as outlined from May 2010 onwards. Such an approach has the potential to generate similarly negative implications for long-term levels of welfare provision<sup>159</sup> and the broader social fabric, and there has already arguably been evidence of this in autumn 2010 with the various protests against the increase in university tuition fees<sup>160</sup>, alongside the more serious social unrest across much of urban Britain in the summer of 2011<sup>161</sup>. As a consequence of such episodes of social turmoil in the 1980s, David Cameron's generation of 21<sup>st</sup> century Conservatives

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<sup>159</sup> Philippe Naughton, 'Osborne axes Child Trust Funds amidst £6.2 bn cuts', The Times, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2010, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article7135030.ece>

<sup>160</sup> Heidi Blake, Daily Telegraph, 'Student tuition fee protest turns violent as Tory headquarters evacuated', 10<sup>th</sup> November 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/8123194/Student-tuition-fee-protest-turns-violent-as-Tory-headquarters-evacuated.html>

<sup>161</sup> Maeve Kennedy, The Guardian, 'Tottenham: echoes of a history not forgotten as rioting returns', 7<sup>th</sup> August 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/07/tottenham-history-rioting>

have been sensitive to criticisms that have aligned them alongside previous Tory administrations regarding the perceived neglect of poorer, urban areas and their inhabitants who on the whole are reliant on greater levels of state provision and welfare support, and who were adversely affected by funding cutbacks for various welfare policies during the 1980s in particular<sup>162</sup>. However it remains unclear as to whether the approach to retrenchment from 2010 onwards has been specifically influenced by the legacy of the 'New Right' socio-political agenda or whether it has anything different to offer from the 1980s in terms of enhanced 'compassion' in ensuring adequate levels of social policy and welfare provision, while also maintaining social order in the process. The broader social consequences of the summer riots of 2011 may reflect a deep-rooted negative public reaction to government austerity measures, creating the potential for a link to be made between the socio-economic approach of the New Right and the style and model of governance adopted by the Cameron administration.

By contrast to its perceived neglect and indifference to social policy, during the 1980s the Conservative Party appeared to have established a broadly positive reputation of economic competence as a key component of the radical 'New Right' agenda it pursued within this decade. Economic credibility therefore appeared to be the cornerstone of its political dominance, and this reputation was a key factor in the party's impressive achievement of four election victories in a row between 1979 and 1992, with economic competence perhaps the crucial factor in its success in the particularly closely-fought general election of 1992<sup>163</sup>. This reputation of economic competence had been carefully cultivated by the New Right's policy agenda that had featured privatisation, tax cuts and concerted anti-inflationary measures pursued throughout the 1980s. However, this reputation was shattered following the debacle of 'Black Wednesday' on 16th September 1992, *'the day the pound toppled out of the ERM..... a political and economic calamity'*<sup>164</sup>. In

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<sup>162</sup> See also the Coalition Government's 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) proposals, outlining £83 billion of public spending cuts:

[http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spend\\_index.htm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spend_index.htm)

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/spending-review/>

<sup>163</sup> 'Labour's private polls reported that before and during the election around 70 per cent of voters expected to pay more taxes under a Labour government'.

Cited in David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1992*, (Macmillan Press, Basingstoke, 1992), Ch.12, p.268.

<sup>164</sup> John Major, *The Autobiography*, (Harper-Collins, London, 1999), Ch.14, p.312

the wake of this event John Major's Conservative government found that its former superiority on economic policy matters (as established during the 1980s), was eradicated by a fundamental lack of public trust on this vital issue. New Labour subsequently eclipsed the Conservatives in terms of economic reputation as the 1990s progressed, and the outcome of the 1997 general election was arguably sealed some years beforehand on the basis of such fundamental economic factors affecting electoral fortunes<sup>165</sup>, although issues such as sleaze and party divisions would also later transpire. The disruptive legacy of 'Black Wednesday' could therefore be viewed as a major breach from the New Right's economic blueprint, and it certainly played a key part in the Conservatives seeking to widen their overall policy appeal and extend their emphasis on social issues after 1997, as they were no longer as reliant on a relatively formidable economic record.

Given the electoral annihilation of 1997 and further heavy defeats in 2001 and 2005, it became apparent that not only had the Conservative Party lost its previously unrivalled mantle of economic probity and competence, but perhaps more significantly, the party was also perceived as being out of touch with significant swathes of contemporary British society, particularly in relation to key aspects of the modern lifestyle and the associated social policies that had become important determinants in many people's voting habits. This perhaps indicated that just as 'Keynesianism' had appeared to have served its purpose as a socio-economic model by the mid-1970s, so therefore had the principles and policies associated with Thatcherism and the 'New Right' by the mid-1990s, although Conservative politicians were often resistant to such suggestions, including the 'modernisers' within the party leadership after 2005, (in government from 2010)<sup>166</sup>, along with key groups of backbenchers such as the more traditionalist 'Cornerstone'<sup>167</sup> group of more socially conservative MPs. This went to the root of the Conservative Party's troubled and uncertain

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<sup>165</sup> John Major noted that in relation to Black Wednesday:

*'On that day, a fifth consecutive Conservative election victory.....became remote, if not impossible', cited in John Major, The Autobiography, (Harper-Collins, London, 1999), Ch.14, p.312*

<sup>166</sup> Alex Singleton, *'Is David Cameron reinventing himself as a Thatcherite?'*, Daily Telegraph, February 21st 2011, <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/alexsingleton/100076991/is-david-cameron-reinventing-himself-as-a-thatcherite/>

<sup>167</sup> The Cornerstone group consists of approximately 40 Conservative MPs after the 2010 General Election (13% of the parliamentary party), see: <http://cornerstone-group.org.uk/>



identity in the post-Thatcher period from 1990 onwards, with rival influences grappling for the party's soul and its future political direction. In some respects it can therefore be argued that while society appeared to have evolved and developed during the party's eighteen years in power (1979-97), the Conservative hierarchy, its broad attitudes and the wider party structure had seemingly failed to adapt and mould its own social policy agenda and social outlook accordingly. This was despite there being evidence of some notable demographic shifts across society in terms of gender politics, greater sexual diversity, more non-conventional family models and higher levels of multi-ethnicity within an overall more diverse and tolerant British social structure. This became evident in ongoing electoral difficulties and lack of broad appeal, as outlined by a Conservative MP at the start of the 21st century:

*'My children..... are all bright and ..... in their mid or late twenties, and probably natural Tories. But none of them would ever vote Tory. They think the party is totally out of touch. All the stuff about gays is totally incredible to them..... We have not selected a woman or an ethnic minority candidate for a single winnable seat. That's the sort of party we have become'*<sup>168</sup>.

Once the Conservative Party was firmly consigned to opposition after 1997, this definitive electoral development provided party reformers and modernisers with a significant impetus to reform and explicitly re-align the party's 'post-Thatcher' position in relation to some specific key issues and areas of social policy in particular, without abandoning Thatcherism and the 'New Right' legacy entirely. Therefore although the Thatcherite focus on neo-liberal economics, free-markets and Euroscepticism seemed to have been broadly maintained as key political tenets of Conservative identity, social policy had also ostensibly become a key competing factor in determining the nation's broader political agenda and electoral behaviour. This renewed focus on devising distinct social policies and liberalising the party's collective social attitude was further influenced by the fact that by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite economic setbacks like 'Black Wednesday', there was broad cross-party agreement in support of the Thatcherite 'neo-liberal' economic

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<sup>168</sup> David Curry, Conservative MP, Interview with Hugo Young, 3 September 2000, cited in *The Hugo Young Papers: A Journalist's Notes from the Heart of Politics*, Ion Trewin (ed.), (Penguin, London, 2009), p.667

agenda that appeared to have been irreversibly established following the sustained period of Conservative government in the 1980s. By default therefore, social and welfare policy issues now required enhanced political attention after being somewhat sidelined by the New Right's hostility to the perceived dependency culture engendered by the post-war social and welfare policies. The New Right's economic agenda of the 1980s had ultimately shifted the broader political debate and wider public mood in favour of the Conservative 'New Right' political perspective, but the diverse social trends and developments of this period were less aligned with New Right values and therefore somewhat undermined the Conservative Party's long-term electoral position. It is within this context that David Cameron's leadership of the Conservative Party since late 2005 has from the very outset accepted and embraced the evolution of contemporary British society as an integral aspect of his determined vision to reverse the tide of repeated electoral defeat:

*'David Cameron has stated his desire to "rebalance" the Conservative Party because "towards the end of the 1980s we did become too much the economics party". He felt able to do so because of his conviction that his party has won the battle of ideas in political economy, and that New Labour's success was very proof of that'*<sup>169</sup>.

This viewpoint acknowledging the need to specifically address and give greater emphasis to welfare and social policy echoed those of party heavyweights who had preceded Cameron in holding prominent positions within the party following the loss of office in 1997. In 1998 Michael Portillo, the former Thatcher Cabinet Minister and Shadow Chancellor (2000-2001) had claimed (as part of his transformation from a 'New Right' disciple of Thatcherism to a socially liberal Conservative), that the Tories needed to address welfare reform, particularly *'getting away from the sense of entitlement'*<sup>170</sup> evident in some welfare recipients, as well as tackling the negative image of some aspects of the party's approach to welfare policy. Even William Hague (party leader 1997-2001), and viewed as being less socially liberal than the post-1997 Portillo, accepted that the *'Tories cannot any*

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<sup>169</sup> Simon Lee, 'Convergence, Critique and Divergence: The Development of Economic Policy under David Cameron', cited in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.5, p.78, adapted from Dylan Jones, *Cameron on Cameron: Conversations with Dylan Jones*, (Fourth Estate, London, 2008), p.288

<sup>170</sup> Michael Portillo, Interview with Hugo Young, 24 September 1988, cited in *The Hugo Young Papers: A Journalist's Notes from the Heart of Politics*, (Penguin, 2009), p.573

*longer be just an “economic party”..... (and) implied a desire to open up on the welfare and other social issues*<sup>171</sup>. Therefore, despite such ostensible success in shaping the country's long-term economic values and infrastructure during the watershed decade of the 1980s, there was a growing feeling by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century that the required focus on social issues had been somewhat neglected during the period of Thatcherite political hegemony, and that the Conservative Party had been responsible for *‘shirking responsibility for industrial and social issues where it ought to act’*<sup>172</sup>. Such apparent neglect, lack of priority and limited interest in social issues ultimately appeared to result in the Conservatives developing a sense of disconnection with the mainstream electorate's general social values and expectations that had been shaped as a reaction to the dramatic economic changes of the 1980s. This culminated in uninspiring and disconnected social policies that were unappealing to significant swathes of society, and which offer one key explanation for the major loss of electoral support the party experienced from 1997 onwards.

This post-Thatcher, New Right legacy generated the phenomena of the Conservatives increasingly perceived as being ‘out of touch’ with broader society at the end of the 20th century, a 100-year period that the party had dominated in political terms. This was observed by major Conservative donor Michael Ashcroft after the 2005 General Election when he warned that despite a modest electoral improvement (an increased vote of 0.7%), the level of popular support for the party was effectively ‘flatlining’ and had risen minimally in eight years (1.7%)<sup>173</sup>. Ashcroft subsequently concluded that there needed to be urgent ‘modernisation’ and radical reform of Conservative Party values and identity if the party was to make any kind of significant electoral recovery<sup>174</sup> within a post-Thatcher British society. Such deep-rooted limitations in wider public support was arguably influenced both by the negative economic performance of the last Conservative government, along with a perceived unpalatable and unsympathetic approaches to challenging socio-economic issues such as unemployment, the benefits system and welfare reform. A concerted attempt to re-

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<sup>171</sup> William Hague, Interview with Hugo Young, Centre for Policy Studies Dinner, 19 January 1999, cited in *Ibid.*, p.573

<sup>172</sup> David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, (Penguin, London, 1992), Ch.4. p.51

<sup>173</sup> Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010), Ch.16, p.351

<sup>174</sup> Michael Ashcroft, *Smell the Coffee: A Wakeup Call for the Conservative Party*, (Politicos, London, 2005)

balance this approach has been evident since Cameron's seizure of the leadership in 2005, with its 'modernising' emphasis on:

*'protecting core services ahead of tax cuts..... (and being) at ease with modern Britain, with a multicultural society and with people who had different lifestyles and sexual preferences'*<sup>175</sup>.

Such an introspective analysis and subsequent desire for a fresh strategic approach aligned itself with existing external opinions about the Conservative Party image, identity and wider public perception in the aftermath of the dominant 'New Right' era, and specifically the Thatcherite association with conservative Victorian social attitudes, a position that could often be aligned with intolerance. At the 2002 Conservative Party Conference, Party Chairman Theresa May accepted that the party needed to extend its popular appeal and effectively 'catch up' with the changing British social agenda that had evolved considerably while the party had been in power up until 1997. In this context, May controversially acknowledged that many people had negative memories of the previous Conservative government and some of its social attitudes:

*"There's a lot we need to do in this party of ours. Our base is too narrow and so, occasionally, are our sympathies. You know what some people call us - the nasty party"*<sup>176</sup>.

Such a brutal self-assessment is perhaps a reflection of the fact that in the three general elections between 1997 and 2005, the Conservative Party and its New Right focus on economic neo-liberalism appeared out of touch with the aspirations, social priorities and contemporary attitudes of modern, multicultural, heterogeneous Britain, often abruptly and instinctively opposed to the Labour government's 'social liberalism'<sup>177</sup> and its associated

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<sup>175</sup> Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010), Ch.4, p.70

<sup>176</sup> Theresa May, speech to Conservative Party Conference in Bournemouth, cited in *The Guardian*, Monday 7<sup>th</sup> October 2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2002/oct/07/conservatives2002.conservatives1>

<sup>177</sup> Andrew Rawnsley, *The End of the Party: The Rise and Fall of New Labour*, (Penguin, London, 2010), Ch.26, p.451

bureaucratic measures, yet having little in terms of a constructive alternative agenda to offer. Thus, the New Right vocabulary and rhetoric that was politically appealing during the 1980s now appeared to hinder efforts to articulate a coherent and persuasive Conservative Party programme or image in terms of an innovative and coherent set of social policies. For example, in a throwback to the Thatcherite 'Victorian' mentality on both social and economic issues, after 1997 the party opposed issues such as adoption rights for gay couples, initially opposed the minimum wage<sup>178</sup> and also the 'targeted' tax credits policy aimed at poorer social groups, often creating adverse headlines in the process when its own stance appeared out of touch with a more benevolent and tolerant public opinion<sup>179</sup>. Conservative Party modernisers have therefore attempted to detach themselves somewhat from the intolerant and moralistic aspect of the New Right's legacy, fully conscious of the party's '*weak standing with the electorate, particularly on health and welfare issues*'<sup>180</sup>, and in turn have sought to progressively and pragmatically develop a more appealing image for moderate floating voters under David Cameron's leadership since 2005. The New Right's intense ideological emphasis ultimately appeared to have de-stabilised the party's internal equilibrium in the long-term, affecting the long-term balance of its policy focus. By the start of the 21st century this ultimately led to demands for re-alignment and the 'detoxifying' of the Conservative image<sup>181</sup> in relation to the more negative aspects of the New Right's legacy, and an opportunity to address its '*divided ideological legacy.....(of) economic liberalism (and) social conservatism*'<sup>182</sup>. Cameron has therefore purposely sought to eradicate negative perceptions by revising the party's position on some key social and welfare policy issues and therefore making:

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<sup>178</sup> Jon Stone, 'History of the UK's minimum wage', Total Politics, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2010, <http://www.totalpolitics.com/blog/28013/history-of-the-uk-s-minimum-wage.shtml>

<sup>179</sup> Yorkshire Post, 'Gay adoption vote opens split in Tory ranks', Monday 4th November 2002, [http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/around-yorkshire/local\\_stories/gay\\_adoption\\_vote\\_opens\\_split\\_in\\_tory\\_ranks\\_1\\_2441444](http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/around-yorkshire/local_stories/gay_adoption_vote_opens_split_in_tory_ranks_1_2441444)

<sup>180</sup> Rob Baggott, 'Conservative health policy', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.5, p.89

<sup>181</sup> Patrick Hennessy, 'Not the nasty party: the Conservatives have changed significantly, says Theresa May', The Daily Telegraph, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/8801264/Not-the-nasty-party-the-Conservatives-have-changed-significantly-says-Theresa-May.html>

<sup>182</sup> Kevin Hickson, 'The New Tories may be a puzzle but the pieces do make up a new kind of Britain', *Parliamentary Brief Online*, 30<sup>th</sup> March 2010, p.1, <http://www.parliamentarybrief.com/2010/03/the-new-tories-may-be-a-puzzle-but-the-pieces>

*'major attempts to distance the Conservatives from their image as the "nasty" or "uncaring" party..... to "decontaminate" the brand'*<sup>183</sup>.

### **New Right Influences over the Conservative Party's policy agenda in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

In seeking to speak with a more 'compassionate' and liberal tone on social and welfare policy-making in particular, the Conservative Party in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has aspired to adopt a modernised, pragmatic and 'reformist' policy approach, adapting and accepting much of Labour's increased investment in public services and the associated increased taxation agenda since 1997. This was a consequence of '*New Labour's politics of dominance in the area of public services*'<sup>184</sup> and the associated electoral success in the form of three successive general election victories. Election results between 1997 and 2005 would therefore suggest that the electorate broadly supported this enhanced attention to public services as espoused by Blair and Brown, although the Conservatives consistently demanded greater efficiency in the use and expenditure of public finances in terms of supporting associated social and welfare policies. In responding to such political realities in a pragmatic and flexible manner, the Conservatives have adapted their image and renewed their focus on refreshing their policy agenda within this specific sphere. This has resulted in a departure from the more ideologically robust 'New Right' stance of the 1980s, although in seeking to revitalise the Conservative Party brand, David Cameron has been careful not to completely detach himself from the Thatcher influence and legacy<sup>185</sup> and alienate sections of his party in the process, in rhetorical terms at least. Nevertheless, the more socially liberal and tolerant 'modernising' tendency within the Conservative Party has notably progressed under the leadership of Cameron since late 2005, arguably at the expense of the

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<sup>183</sup> Simon Griffiths, 'Cameron's Conservatives and the Public Services', cited in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.7, p.98.

See also Matthew Taylor, '*Likeability to electability*', Comment is Free, The Guardian, 17<sup>th</sup> July 2008: '*Deliberately, boldly and often in the face of sotto voce carping from his own side, Cameron has decontaminated the Tory brand*'.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jul/17/davidcameron.conservatives>

<sup>184</sup> Matt Beech, 'Cameron and Conservative Ideology', cited in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.2, p.21

<sup>185</sup> Benedict Brogan, '*Cameron calls for 'moral capitalism' in move away from Thatcher*', Daily Mail, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2009,

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1133320/Cameron-calls-moral-capitalism-away-Thatcher.html>

economic neo-liberals, and possibly as a consequence of the difficult years of William Hague's leadership (1997-2001) and also the Iain Duncan Smith era (2001-3) in particular<sup>186</sup>. During this phase of national opposition (1997-2003), the party appeared particularly confused about its political identity and reverted to speaking primarily to its core supporters and its media allies, with its popular vote remaining static accordingly:

*'Between 1999 and the 2001 election campaign, Conservative policy changed direction to focus on bolstering the Party's "core" support..... the leadership appeared increasingly to shape policy in response to the latest headlines in the Daily Telegraph and Daily Mail'*<sup>187</sup>.

Yet despite such an approach under Cameron that has been intent on widening the broad appeal and revised policy agenda of modern, post-Thatcher Conservatism, even in 2010 the party's level of popular support was disappointing in comparison to former levels of electoral approval, rising less than 6% between the electoral nadir of 1997 and the return to national office in 2010<sup>188</sup>. David Cameron subsequently moved into Number 10 *'with a smaller proportion of support from the electorate than any previous Conservative prime minister'*,<sup>189</sup> although marginally more than Tony Blair's level of support on his third election victory for Labour in 2005. This reflected the Conservative Party's image problems within some sections of society, suggesting an inability to eradicate the wider public's memories of some unpopular policies from its previous spells in office.

While such statistics of declining contemporary political support may provide succour to those Thatcherites from the New Right tradition who seek a return to the 1980s

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<sup>186</sup> See Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon, 'The Barren Years: 1997-2005', cited in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *Recovering Power: The Conservatives in Opposition Since 1867*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005), Ch.11.

<sup>187</sup> Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon, 'The Barren Years: 1997-2005', cited in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *Recovering Power: The Conservatives in Opposition Since 1867*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005), Ch.11, p.255

<sup>188</sup> See Andrew Defty, 'The Conservatives, social policy and public opinion', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.4, p.70: *'..... the Conservative share of the vote rose by less than 6% between the 1997 and 2010 general elections, from a post-war low of 30.7% to 36.1%'*.

<sup>189</sup> Andrew Rawnsley, *'Two-tribe politics is over. But the likes of John Prescott can't see it'*, The Observer, 28<sup>th</sup> November 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/nov/28/andrew-rawnsley-electoral-reform>

populist brand of Conservative policies, these bleak electoral statistics ultimately indicate the long-term decline in popular support for the Conservative Party, the '*natural party of government*' for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This illustrates the dilemma facing any incoming Conservative government and its efforts to re-mould distinct and radical social and welfare policies along with a greater degree of decentralisation and economic efficiency fuelled by its 'Big Society' vision. With such limited, falling and volatile levels of popular support, this fragile public mood is likely to further undermine the Party's popularity if it pursues the streamlining economic reforms it claims are necessary to tackle the national deficit amidst a lingering recession and global economic crisis, significantly hampering its room for manoeuvre in its social policy-making agenda. However, amidst the financial and banking crisis from 2008 onwards, the Conservative leadership's decision to adopt the language of retrenchment and to de-align from the Labour administration's spending plans suggested a move in the direction of the Thatcherite 'neo-liberal' approach of the 1980s. In pragmatically adapting to the economic fluctuations of the time, Conservative politicians were able to argue with greater confidence for 'small government' and inserting some clear divisions and differences between the two main parties in the process on both economic and social policy. This approach has been viewed by some as an opportunity for the Conservatives to re-assert their case for the New Right's agenda of a smaller state and reduced expenditure on key welfare and social policies, with a prolonged recession and global financial crisis creating the appropriate conditions for this. This strategy came to its most explicit fruition when having returned to office at the head of a coalition with the Liberal Democrats in May 2010, £17.5 billion was initially trimmed from the welfare bill alone in the Emergency Budget that took effect from October 2010<sup>190</sup>. This appeared to reflect in economic terms at least, that the party had retained some core Thatcherite New Right principles, particularly regarding the modern party's '*historic scepticism towards public spending*'<sup>191</sup>. Therefore, in this revised analysis of the country's economic policy-making approach:

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<sup>190</sup> See:

[http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/junebudget\\_complete.pdf](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/junebudget_complete.pdf)

<sup>191</sup> Nick Ellison, 'The Conservative Party and Public Expenditure', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.2, p.59



*“Cameron ditched his previous pledge to match Labour spending levels..... (and) rediscovered virtues in Margaret Thatcher, the woman hitherto largely airbrushed from history in his speeches. Cameron and Osborne made themselves champions of fiscal conservatism, opening up the biggest divide on economic policy between the parties for more than a decade”<sup>192</sup>.*

In this context of a re-evaluation of Conservative economic and social priorities and levels of public expenditure, there appears to have been an apparent reversion to the Thatcherite language of retrenchment amidst a major recession, and Cameron appears to have revised and re-defined his approach to the promotion of ‘*compassionate conservatism*’ in practical policy terms, taking the opportunity to relegate and downgrade the former dominance of the centralised state. Utilising the language and rhetoric of social responsibility and community action, Cameron has therefore initiated flagship policies such as ‘the Big Society’ which despite criticisms of its vagueness, has symbolised a willingness to take the ideological argument to Labour about how to operate both economic and social policy within a tighter financial strait-jacket, seeking to reclaim the Conservative Party’s economic reputation while simultaneously seeking to infiltrate Labour’s traditional hegemony in electoral terms on social and welfare policy matters.

The long-term challenge for the contemporary Conservative Party in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century remains to convince key socio-economic groups within the electorate that it seeks to pursue a credible agenda of reform, modernisation and innovation of social and welfare policies for this specific historical era, and that a simultaneous economic approach moulded by fiscal conservatism, retrenchment and a nod to the New Right’s neo-liberal traditions, is in fact a genuine attempt at balancing the nation’s books and restoring a degree of stability and order to the nation’s finances. Such an approach has however had to be reviewed by changing economic circumstances, as:

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<sup>192</sup> Andrew Rawnsley, *The End of the Party: The Rise and Fall of New Labour*, (Penguin, London, 2010), Ch.35, p.603

*'The politics of the welfare state has been changed by the economic downturn. As a Times leader put it (2008), "Compassionate conservatism is a more difficult proposition in a recession"'.*<sup>193</sup>

In pursuing this approach therefore, the New Right's legacy of fiscal conservatism has reappeared on the political horizon, and David Cameron's modern Conservative Party has been hampered in its socio-economic outlook by the challenges of a global economic recession, making it even more difficult to fulfil their primary aims of streamlining the British welfare model in a compassionate way in order to simultaneously maintain sustainable and genuine welfare and social policies.

In cultivating a more compassionate image, the Conservative Party's leadership of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century will be wary of the potential dangers and hazards in preserving this appearance while engaged in a political agenda focused on retrenchment, reflecting the prevailing socio-political mood since the party returned to national office in 2010. There are therefore both potentially negative perceptions and radical implications of pursuing welfare reform amidst a recession, as identified by some elements of the 'New Right' from the 1970s onwards:

*'In many countries, a conservative resurgence accompanied the economic turmoil of the late 1970s. Conservative parties gained strength, and within these parties leadership shifted to those most critical of the post-war consensus on social and economic policy. These newly ascendant conservatives viewed the welfare state as a large part of the problem..... In short conservatives viewed retrenchment not as a necessary evil but as a necessary good'*<sup>194</sup>.

This suggestion of a sense of political opportunism amidst economic uncertainty among acolytes of the New Right has been observed by academics including Andrew Gamble, who

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<sup>193</sup> Stephen Driver, "'Fixing our Broken Society": David Cameron's Post-Thatcherite Social Policy', cited in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.6, p.95

<sup>194</sup> Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State: Reagan, Thatcher and the Politics of Retrenchment*, (Cambridge University Press, 1994), Introduction, page 1

has stated that dissident figures on both the left and right of politics in the 1970s who were disillusioned by the apparent failings of the post-war consensus, subsequently '*welcomed the political space created by the recession and the possibilities for refashioning institutions and redesigning policies in radical ways*'<sup>195</sup>. Gamble has referred to this development as being part of a '*crisis of social democracy*'<sup>196</sup> which gave the more pro-capitalist 'New Right' agenda an opportunity to fill a socio-political vacuum with a model of government more aligned with the principles of free-market liberal democracy instead, namely a '*free economy and a strong state*'. Within such a socio-political context, the New Right's attitude and legacy in terms of the possibility to radically restructure of the welfare state has meant that contemporary groups of floating voters have remained more sceptical of the Conservative Party's position towards social policy and ensuring adequate welfare provision in recent years (evident in declining levels of popular support at recent general elections). This is based on perceptions that the Conservative Party did not sufficiently invest in or focus on the core welfare state during the 1980s, and have therefore sought to pursue a '*broader decontamination strategy*' in this respect<sup>197</sup>.

In such a context the new generation of Conservative politicians have to convince a wider and more sceptical audience of their genuine interest and benevolent concern in both the maintenance and innovation of credible social policies (within a revised post-Thatcher image), as part of their overall strategy to establish a sustainable model of welfare provision for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This may be a challenge given that there is evidence from within the Conservative Party's 2010 intake of MPs of a notable appetite '*for the Thatcherite agenda of tax cuts, continued marketisation and downward pressure on public spending*'<sup>198</sup>. In this context it would therefore appear that some within the Conservative ranks have seen an

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<sup>195</sup> Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1994), Ch.1, p.21

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch.1, p.22

<sup>197</sup> Evidence of this can be seen in Kavanagh and Cowley's analysis of Cameron's new approach to policy after 2005:

*'Several internal party studies had demonstrated that many voters still viewed new Conservative policies and statements through the prism of the party's unattractive brand..... (and) that Thatcherism had concentrated too much on economy and wealth creation'*.

Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010), Ch.4, p.66-67

<sup>198</sup> Nick Ellison, 'The Conservative Party and Public Expenditure', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.2, p.58

opportunity or a 'necessary good' (as was ostensibly the case in the 1970s) for radical socio-economic restructuring and the resurgence of a Thatcherite 'rolling back' of the state and the instillation of some 'vigorous virtues' into the British welfare model as a consequence of economic difficulties faced. Public opinion towards this approach is open to conjecture, as there appears to be significant fluidity in public attitudes towards taxation and public spending, with some recent analysis indicating a shift towards increased support for retrenchment, particularly so as the New Labour years in office progressed, *'with 'strong evidence for a decline in support for tax-funded increases in state provision and hardening of public attitudes towards welfare recipients'* <sup>199</sup> during the Blair/Brown era. However such increased scepticism of Labour's perceived financial profligacy from 1997 onwards has not appeared to automatically translate into an enthusiastic endorsement of alternative Conservative models of economic retrenchment, perhaps evident in the inconclusive outcome of the 2010 General Election<sup>200</sup>. Such apparent wider suspicion of Conservative public spending proposals on social and welfare policies has been heightened by the economic slump and associated employment insecurities of those who may come to rely on its provisions, and in such a context Cameron's ongoing focus in this policy sphere will be to convince the electorate that the maintenance of core services can be complemented by greater economic efficiency within a framework of fiscal conservatism. The New Right re-structured some key components of the established post-war welfare state in Britain during the 1980s, but a more radical restructuring of core public services and reduction of welfare expenditure remained an uncompleted aspiration of the 'New Right' project during its decade of political ascendancy. The failure to fulfil its idealised vision of welfare and social policy provision was fundamentally due to reasons that remain to this day, *'that the structural impediments involved are little short of immense'*<sup>201</sup> and also that *'a crucial*

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<sup>199</sup> Andrew Defty, 'The Conservatives, social policy and public opinion, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.4, p.65

<sup>200</sup> For further information on public opinion on this issue as expressed in British Social Attitudes surveys, see Defty (2011) who cites that *'public support for spending restraint, and especially cuts, is limited to particular groups, and there remains a high level of public support for state provision, which may call into question the level of support for a more widespread rolling back of the state'*.

Ibid., cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.4, pp.66-7

<sup>201</sup> Nick Ellison, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), p.59

*constraint on the Conservatives was the sheer popularity of welfare institutions*<sup>202</sup>. Public opinion and significant bureaucratic impediments were therefore key factors that ultimately prevented the New Right's imprint on British society and policy-making from being as deep as it could have been during its period of political hegemony throughout the 1980s. This raises the key question as to whether the same impediments are in place in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should similar policy reforms be pursued.

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<sup>202</sup> John Hills, *'Thatcherism, New Labour and the Welfare State'*, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics, (August 1998), [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/5553/1/Thatcherism\\_New\\_Labour\\_and\\_the\\_Welfare\\_State.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/5553/1/Thatcherism_New_Labour_and_the_Welfare_State.pdf)

## Modern Conservatism and Social Justice in Theory

The purpose of this chapter is to address and analyse the meaning of the concept of social justice and how it has influenced the formulation of Conservative Party social and welfare policy in the contemporary political environment, focusing on policy evolution of recent years, and particularly since the party comprehensively lost power in 1997. Social justice is an ambiguous phenomenon that has proved to be a dynamic, ambiguous and flexible term in the modern political arena, with its different interpretations forming the basis for significant debate among the various political parties and politicians of the modern era from approximately 1979 onwards. A concise yet fundamental definition of this crucial political term can be expressed as:

*'The morally justifiable distribution of material rewards..... often seen to imply a bias in favour of equality'.<sup>203</sup>*

Such emphasis on equality implies an 'egalitarian' concept that has subsequently developed into a pivotal political issue that has become increasingly prominent in British political debate over recent years, and which in turn has shaped and influenced the formulation of both social and economic policy of the mainstream political parties, and which has retained significant resonance and appeal with key parts of the electorate. Its conventional political interpretation suggests the need for an active and interventionist role for the state as the mechanism that can deliver and ensure that this variant of 'justice' entails, and the concept has consequently been of significance to contemporary Conservative fortunes in particular, as recent polling has indicated that there is:

*'greater scepticism about the Conservatives' broader policy agenda, which to some extent supports the data from the British Social Attitudes survey..... (indicating) relatively high levels of support for state provision'<sup>204</sup>.*

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<sup>203</sup> Andrew Heywood, *Politics*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn. 2002), p.431

<sup>204</sup> Andrew Defty, 'The Conservatives, social policy and public opinion, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.4, p.73

Such public attitudes have indicated scepticism about the Conservatives' broader social policy agenda, alongside evidence of firm support within society for a positive and fairly active role for the state<sup>205</sup>. This political trend has led to an enhanced and inflated emphasis on the concept of social justice and its associated vocabulary, and it has subsequently been increasingly utilised as a rhetorical device by mainstream politicians of all parties, with the desirability of achieving a policy-making outcome ostensibly based on the principles of social justice an increasingly influential element of contemporary political debate. However, given that the concept of social justice is not always clear in its meaning and is open to political interpretation, what its precise principles are has also been a key aspect of the political and philosophical debate that its usage has generated.

Although somewhat vague in terms of its precise meaning, 'social justice' has been a key feature of the evolution and formulation of both social and economic policy within the modern political era, and all political parties and viewpoints have been affected in various ways by its influence. On its most basic level, it ultimately appears that the conventional and widely-held interpretation of social justice is fundamentally aligned with the values of fairness and equality, bolstered by an active role for the state in achieving such aspirational outcomes. In this context such terms and phrases have tended to be more generally used and emphasised by politicians of the left and centre-left of the political spectrum, who have in the modern political era appeared more comfortable in the use of such associated rhetoric. Subsequently, the term and its associated vocabulary have been viewed as an ideological accessory of the left and centre-left for most of its usage within the modern political era. Within such a 'conventional' interpretation, the role of the state has accordingly been traditionally viewed as a fundamental tool as a means of achieving social justice, either by government social or economic policy and/or via state intervention to

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<sup>205</sup> See Ipsos-Mori Survey, *'Private Provision of Public Services'*, (19th June 2008), which indicated that the number of respondents in 'strong agreement' with the following statement "*In principle, public services should be run by the government or local authorities, rather than by private companies*", had risen from 27% to 50% between 2000 and 2008. The number of those agreeing with the statement had risen from an already high 66% to 79% in the same time period:

<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2428/Private-Provision-of-Public-Services.aspx?view=wide>

achieve a more egalitarian or ‘socially just’ outcome in terms of addressing long-term inequality and poverty within society. This aspect has re-affirmed the leftist hue of the concept and as a result of such trends, many Conservatives, both politicians and commentators, have come to be critical and even resentful of the left’s monopoly and specific interpretation of this term, being sceptical of its ‘egalitarian’ meaning, along with its actual effectiveness and practicality in the process. In short, egalitarianism and fairness are concepts that have been regularly used as the conventional justifications for social justice as part of an ‘*emotional appeal*’<sup>206</sup>, by mainly left-wing politicians, and this has presented politicians who are dubious of its meaning and interpretation with a challenging dilemma in how they can develop an alternative analysis that negates such emotive implications yet which can offer a challenging and distinctive alternative with popular political support.

In the context of a traditional Conservative political perspective therefore, a concept such as ‘social justice’ that appears to be skewed in favour of a state-generated egalitarianism creates potential difficulties in terms of being enthusiastically embraced as an aspirational or idealised model of society. Indeed many Conservative academics and politicians have condemned this left-of-centre interpretation of social justice that seeks to promote enhanced levels of social equality as being ‘*one of the central prejudices of modern British politics*’ that emerges in practical form as a flawed ‘*belief that it is the proper function of the British state to influence the distribution of wealth for its own sake*’<sup>207</sup>. This Conservative position therefore fundamentally rejects the philosophical basis behind the conventional view of social justice, namely its emphasis on greater egalitarianism and a more ‘statist’ style of governance as a consequence, fundamentally questioning the need for such an approach to public policy-making in the process. Joseph and Sumption in particular argue that in practical terms an inflated role for the state is a natural consequence once this concept is established as a key guidance for government policy-making<sup>208</sup>, and the position of such Conservative and free-market thinkers, academics and politicians have therefore preferred to endorse a position that favours a less interventionist approach as far as the

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<sup>206</sup> David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, (Penguin, London, 1992), Ch.8. p.112

<sup>207</sup> Keith Joseph and Jonathan Sumption, *Equality*, (W & J MacKay, Chatham, 1979), Ch.1, p.1

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.



role of the state is concerned, instead focusing on the value of individual capabilities which involve *'privileging liberty, (compared to) socialists prioritising equality'*<sup>209</sup>.

Conservatives are therefore traditionally sceptical of the concepts of egalitarianism and conventional social justice due to the fact that, as already alluded to, both are political terms that are viewed as being aligned with the left of politics and the socialist or social democratic tradition and vision of society. Consequently, many Conservatives have a deep-seated *'wariness of egalitarianism'*<sup>210</sup>, in that they feel it is part of a left-wing myth that justifies a particular version of social justice that relies on significant state provision to achieve its aims, and within an overall social model that argues that equality of outcome is both desirable and achievable. This perception and interpretation of how society should ideally function is rejected as a 'myth' by many of those within the 'New Right' faction of the Conservative Party that has come to prominence over the past thirty-five years, and who are notably strident in articulating a viewpoint endorsed by many conservative politicians and thinkers across the world, namely that inequality is *'natural and inevitable, a fact of life which cannot be altered, and which therefore should be readily accepted, rather than viewed as a problem to be eradicated'*<sup>211</sup>. Indeed, stemming from this scepticism of egalitarian vocabulary and sentiment, some Conservatives with links to the Thatcherite New Right tradition have subsequently referred to social justice as a *'slippery term'*<sup>212</sup>, open to ambiguity and representing an inaccurate vision of how human nature operates in practice. This conventional 'social-democratic' interpretation of social justice therefore ultimately represents a clear and fundamental distinction from the core Conservative principles of the post-1979 era, namely the need for greater individualism and enhanced economic freedoms that entail greater competition, extended choice and better value for the individual. Conservative critics of the leftist use of the term argue that the implications of this approach are a growth in 'statist' regulation, which in turn creates a state-instigated outcome that could also be viewed as unjust from a free-market perspective. The New Right have

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<sup>209</sup> Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics And Philosophy Of Inequality*, (I.B Tauris, London, 2011), Ch.1, p.19

<sup>210</sup> David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, (Penguin, London, 1992), Ch.8. p.112

<sup>211</sup> Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics And Philosophy Of Inequality*, (I.B Tauris, London, 2011), Ch.1, p.5.

This author argues that *'all Conservatives are emphatic that inequality per se is both desirable and necessary'*. Ibid., Ch.1, p.5.

<sup>212</sup> David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, (Penguin, London, 1992), Ch.8. p.112

therefore argued that such 'un-natural' and impractical desires for greater equality of outcome directly led to the bureaucratic and interventionist tendencies of the state that were a prominent feature of the post-war years of consensus between 1945 and the mid-1970s.

### **Conservative views of liberty and equality**

Most Conservatives would therefore view political and economic liberty as of a much greater value than the achievement of greater social and economic equality<sup>213</sup>, the latter being a concept which is generally viewed by those on the right of politics as being an idealistic theory that is '*undesirable and unattainable*'<sup>214</sup> in practical reality. They instead emphasise the importance of securing and maintaining economic freedoms from the potentially dominant and repressive power of the state as the key mechanism by which individuals can progress within society. Some Conservative thinkers and politicians would link this broad scepticism towards the likelihood of achieving a society based on collectivism and equality with the more pessimistic outlook towards human nature in general that is often associated with the more right-wing variant of politics. This is a viewpoint that dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century analysis of Thomas Hobbes and his demands for strong government to deal with "*nasty, brutish*" mankind, due to his negative perception of human nature<sup>215</sup> that is inherently unable to behave harmoniously to other individuals. Conservative-minded thinkers and politicians over the centuries have developed a position that views the aspiration towards greater socio-economic equality as an unrealistic notion contrary to this savage and competitive nature inherent within human beings, and are therefore only willing to tolerate greater individual freedoms if bolstered by the framework of a strong state to regulate society and keep order<sup>216</sup>.

On a contemporary basis, this viewpoint is fuelled and further consolidated by the influences and pressures of a capitalist, competitive society, and it is for this reason that for

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<sup>213</sup> See Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics And Philosophy Of Inequality*, (I.B Tauris, London, 2011), Ch.1, p.18-22

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., Ch.1, p.5.

<sup>215</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, (1651)

<sup>216</sup> See Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn., 1994), for a more contemporary analysis of this viewpoint.

many conservatives of both past and present, *'inequality is ultimately rooted in human nature itself'*<sup>217</sup>, and the somewhat 'idealistic' socialist emphasis on blaming external social and material forces for inequality, e.g. the unregulated and arbitrary forces of capitalism, is therefore a fundamentally flawed analysis of socio-economic norms within contemporary society. The Conservative, and particularly the 'New Right' perspective argues that such a socialist interpretation of the promotion of greater equality is in fact contrary to some basic and fundamental tenets of both human behaviour and the 'invisible hand'<sup>218</sup> of the free-market, and while the capacity for social mobility is a concept that should be a perfectly wholesome aspiration for a dynamic 'vigorous' society, this is not the same as greater equality, which should not be. As a supplement to this Hobbesian analysis, this 'New Right' conservative philosophical perspective argues that within an environment of general individual freedom regulated by the state's rule of law, it is a further inherent aspect of human nature for there to be such natural inequality among individual citizens due to the fact that *'some people innately possess more ambition, intelligence or talent than others..... (and this) unequal distribution of such characteristics inevitably results(s) in an inherently unequal society'*<sup>219</sup>.

The mainstream Conservative political viewpoint towards equality (incorporating both One Nation and Thatcherism) therefore regards both 'equality' and the traditional left-wing view of 'social justice' as vague, unrealistic and illusory concepts that defy some basic aspects of human nature relating to competition, material well-being, individual talent and self-interest, which it can be argued are the key factors that *'individuals are motivated primarily by'*<sup>220</sup>. As a result of such differing skills and talents, a natural social hierarchy is said to emerge, further supporting the notion that neither equality nor an egalitarian version of 'social justice' are either achievable or indeed desirable goals<sup>221</sup>. Indeed there are some Conservatives who would argue that when the state attempts to equalise social conditions or to restore greater social justice by intervention, it is often distorting and

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<sup>217</sup> Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics And Philosophy Of Inequality*, (I.B Tauris, London, 2011), Ch.1, p.7

<sup>218</sup> See Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, (1776)

<sup>219</sup> Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics And Philosophy Of Inequality*, (I.B Tauris, London, 2011), Ch.1, p.7

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., Ch.1, p.8

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., Ch.1, p.12

disrupting the intentions of the 'free market' or the natural social order, and it therefore actually functions in an unfair and unjust manner, with even moderate conservatives such as Ian Gilmour<sup>222</sup> acknowledging such consequences of this explicitly interventionist approach to governance. This viewpoint objects to a state-led redistribution of resources in accordance with the principles of 'social justice' for the principal reason that '*in a morally pluralistic society, any principle of distribution is subjective and contentious*'<sup>223</sup> and the state's motives can therefore be seen as somewhat arbitrary and open to question.

Despite this sceptical critique of social justice, particularly from the perspective of the New Right in its position of political hegemony in the 1980s, the concept has stubbornly refused to be suppressed within contemporary political debate and has sought to continue to influence and shape the motives behind policy formulation. In the post-Thatcher political era in particular from approximately 1990 onwards, politicians across the political spectrum sought to offer a distinct and refreshed political image and they increasingly appeared to compete in terms of being seen as 'fair' and 'just' in their formation and expression of both social and economic policies and how they impact on society. From John Major onwards, post-Thatcher Prime Ministers have both in implicit and explicit terms sought to gradually pacify the tone of their social policy agenda rather than adopt a more abrasive ideological emphasis as seen during the Thatcher era, perhaps an acknowledgment that the New Right's socio-political approach in 1980s Britain had created the wider perception that socio-economic inequalities were becoming more evident<sup>224</sup>. Indeed having condemned New Labour for presiding over the continued expanding gap between rich and poor during its thirteen year term of office<sup>225</sup>, modernising Conservatives from the Cameron inner-circle have openly spoken about the contemporary need to reduce such a growing disparity<sup>226</sup>. Therefore in adopting a more emollient tone in relation to this policy area, there is certainly

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<sup>222</sup> See Ian Gilmour, *Inside Right: A Study of Conservatism*, (Quartet, London, 1978)

<sup>223</sup> See Roy Hattersley and Kevin Hickson, 'In Praise of Social Democracy', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol.83, Issue 1, (January-March 2012), p.7  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-923X.2011.02259.x/pdf>

<sup>224</sup> See Hugo Young, *One of Us*, (Pan Macmillan, London, 1989), p.607:  
*'The Thatcher years saw the largest redistribution of income in favour of the well-off in modern economic history'*.

<sup>225</sup> Report of the National Equality Panel, *An Anatomy of Economic Inequality in the UK*, (January 2010),  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/27\\_01\\_10\\_inequalityfull..pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/27_01_10_inequalityfull..pdf)

<sup>226</sup> Rachel Sylvester, 'Letwin: We will redistribute wealth', *Daily Telegraph*, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2005,  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1506160/Letwin-We-will-redistribute-wealth.html>

potential for 21<sup>st</sup> century Conservatives in utilising the emotive language often aligned with the concept of 'justice' in order to positively connect with key groups within the wider electorate, although the Thatcherites of 1980s vintage have generally appeared less willing to embrace such an approach. This is primarily due to their specific concerns with the left's use and interpretation of the term 'social justice', principally because it symbolises a political and philosophical retreat from the New Right's perspective of a 'just' society, due to the fact that:

*'.....the only clear and consistent meaning one can give to the rhetoric of social justice is the pursuit of ever-greater material equality. That is the issue'<sup>227</sup>.*

The New Right's anti-egalitarian stance therefore succinctly and particularly summarises the distinct Thatcherite scepticism towards this term of 'social justice', namely that social justice appears to imply and even demand an egalitarian distribution of material resources, and it is this approach that many modern Conservatives find undesirable, 'unjust' and unrealistic, and which is ultimately contrary to the fundamentally 'selfish' and competitive instincts of human nature and the 'natural' inequalities that exist within all societies. In this context, the post-1979 Thatcherite Conservative tradition has fundamentally rejected the left's conventional and more communitarian interpretation of this concept, and for the majority of this modern historical period the British Conservative Party has been broadly united on this issue despite divisions elsewhere, rejecting the left's interpretation of social justice as being essentially a form of 'reverse discrimination'. Such sentiments were a particularly evident feature of the party's 1987 manifesto, which many would argue is arguably the most explicit expression of Thatcherite political strength at its electoral zenith:

*'Reverse discrimination is itself an injustice and can have no place in a tolerant and civilised society..... it would undermine the achievement and example of those who had risen on their merits'<sup>228</sup>.*

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<sup>227</sup> David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, (Penguin, London, 1992), Ch.8. p.112

<sup>228</sup> See 1987 Conservative Party Manifesto, *The Next Moves Forward*, p.59

<http://www.conservativemanifesto.com/1987/1987-conservative-manifesto.shtml>

In this context, the Thatcherite vision of social justice is significantly different from the left's traditional interpretation, and as the dominant form of Conservatism from the mid-1970s it has therefore adopted and embraced a model of society and social behaviour from a notably different political perspective. This viewpoint has placed greater emphasis on individualist meritocracy as being at the centre of achieving greater social justice, and from this different political angle *'social justice is interpreted as a reward for individual success, rather than as welfare ideology has it, the equal treatment of all'*<sup>229</sup>. As a result of such scepticism towards traditional notions of social justice and an enhanced focus on economics, individualism and a variation in abilities, it has been subsequently acknowledged from an often critical stance that *'Thatcherism scarcely had a social policy'*<sup>230</sup> throughout her sustained period of governance. However, despite the apparently clearer focus on a radical restructuring of economic policy, this is perhaps a somewhat exaggerated and unfair analysis given that there clearly were social policies developed during the years 1979-90, with some significant attempts to reform and scale back the size of the welfare state in particular, notably from the mid-1980s onwards. The 'New Right' or 'Thatcherite' position would therefore argue that the principle of social justice has been 'hijacked' and manipulated by elements of the left as part of their specific formulation of the concept. Consequently left-of-centre politicians have sought to depict themselves as having enhanced and more enlightened social policies due to them being associated and influenced by their interpretation of 'socially just' principles, moulded by the ethos of a more active and interventionist welfare state.

Equality can therefore be viewed as a key component of the social justice agenda, and it is ultimately an ambiguous concept that is open to interpretation from the various political positions, with the left more traditionally focused on generating a greater equality of outcome using state intervention. The Conservative 'New Right' viewpoint has opposed such an interpretation of state-generated enhanced equality due to its belief that such an approach is in conflict with the human realities of individual ability and competition,

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<sup>229</sup> Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996), Ch.10, p.390

<sup>230</sup> Ian Gilmour, *Dancing With Dogma: Britain Under Thatcherism*, (Simon & Schuster, London, 1992), Ch.6, p.131

alongside their philosophical tendencies towards the achievement of a smaller state model. They have instead emphasised the importance of equality of opportunity, individual freedom and the associated meritocratic principles. The paternalistic 'One Nation' Conservatives, dominant for much of the post-war period of 'consensus' between 1945 and 1975, have broadly accepted the relative definition of poverty and accepted the role of the welfare state to raise the levels of absolute poverty for the poorest members of society, although they have been more willing to embrace a more generous and interventionist state in the name of maintaining social order. However, given their preference for a more hierarchical, class-based, ordered society, with a benevolent upper social hierarchy seeking to provide a generous level of paternalistic government support for the lower classes, they have rejected the New Right's focus on dynamic social mobility between classes. While the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Disraelian brand of British Conservatism focused on the duty of the state and the governing classes assisting the poor and to manage the more extreme examples of inequality<sup>231</sup>, this has created some friction within Conservatism between the One Nation tradition and the New Right variant '*about how far inequality should be permitted to develop*'<sup>232</sup>. However the mainstream Conservative viewpoint across all traditions has generally reached the ultimate conclusion as the 20<sup>th</sup> century has progressed that inequality is an inevitable consequence of the different talents and resources of individual citizens within a competitive, capitalist-orientated society. Nevertheless, there is a strong Conservative paternalistic tradition that argues that it is perfectly possible to support the development of distinctive social policies and a relatively active model of state welfare provision, yet reject the ultimate 'egalitarian' motives and aspirations of the left-of-centre vision of a contemporary welfare state and its associated version of social justice. This latter Conservative approach, primarily representing the 'One Nation' tradition would therefore appear to firmly reject the socialist-orientated notion that if '*one does not believe in equality, one must oppose the welfare state*'<sup>233</sup>.

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<sup>231</sup> See the hierarchical class-based social order evident in novels such as Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil (or The Two Nations)*, (1845)

<sup>232</sup> Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics And Philosophy Of Inequality*, (I.B Tauris, London, 2011), Ch.1, p.47

<sup>233</sup> David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, (Penguin, London, 1992), Ch.8. p.118

The 'One Nation' paternalistic Conservative tendency, with its traditional emphasis on significant state intervention alongside a more explicit collective social conscience in the form of a generous welfare state, has never embraced the sentiments of the left-wing interpretation of social justice and its focus on greater levels of equality in terms of material rewards and/or outcome. This political perspective has perhaps been more focused on reducing the extent or the scale of the gaps in inequality in order for the maintenance of an unequal social model to be deemed acceptable to the rest of society, and such a view *'did not mean any acceptance of equality, but it did entail an acknowledgement that socio-economic inequalities needed to be kept within boundaries or limits'*<sup>234</sup>, primarily to ensure the long-term prospects of the established governing class<sup>235</sup>. This justifies the 'One Nation' Conservative support for a relatively generous welfare state, and therefore despite many differences with the 'New Right' Thatcherites over various social and economic issues in the modern political era, this moderate faction of Conservatism has never embraced equality and has indeed broadly endorsed a similar position on this issue, namely that *'inequality is an inevitable and immutable fact of life'*<sup>236</sup> based on birth, individual qualities and socio-economic circumstance.

It is therefore due to this sense of ideological detachment from the evolution of the modern meaning of social justice (with its leftist and abstract implications), that many contemporary Conservatives of all 'factions' have had some difficulties in expressing or articulating a coherent range of views about it. Most Conservatives would therefore reject the post-war Rawlsian theory of 'justice' within society, a significant socio-political analysis of the modern era that argues that equality and co-operation is a natural state of affairs at the beginning of most societies, and which therefore seeks to justify redistributive social justice and enhanced fairness and equality via the intervention of the state and appropriate legislative measures<sup>237</sup>. Conservatives do not in general accept this purely hypothetical

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<sup>234</sup> Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics And Philosophy Of Inequality*, (I.B Tauris, London, 2011), Ch.1, p.16

<sup>235</sup> At Crystal Palace, London, 24th June 1872 Benjamin Disraeli, the founding father of One Nation Conservatism, stated that:

*'The Palace is unsafe if the cottage is unhappy'*, emphasising the perceived need for the established governing classes to ensure that the lower classes were reasonably content.

<sup>236</sup> See Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics And Philosophy Of Inequality*, (I.B Tauris, London, 2011), Ch.1, p.10

<sup>237</sup> See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1971)



analysis about an imagined 'state of nature', arguing instead that in terms of equality being the alleged '*natural state of mankind ..... there is scarcely any instance in recorded history in which mankind has actually experienced it*'.<sup>238</sup> This viewpoint again emphasises the Conservative attitude that rejects left-of-centre hypothetical situations, and instead endorses practical realities, and in doing so acknowledges that inequality and a clear social hierarchy is an inherent part of the natural order of things that can be justified in behavioural, social and civic terms, and which automatically concludes that a greater equality of outcome certainly cannot be given the same amount of credence based on the practical experiences of most modern societies.

Conservatives of all variations and across different nationalities have therefore sought to revise and counteract the liberal left's version of 'social justice', with one particular alternative justification being the development of the 'social market', a pro-capitalist concept that emphasises how communities can thrive and benefit in positive social terms from a fluid and accessible free-market environment that can ostensibly deliver a fair, balanced and stable society in the process without excessive government intervention. This contrasts with the more 'statist' and 'interventionist' conclusions reached by the left-of-centre variant of social justice, and the concept of the 'market' and its importance has therefore created an alternative 'capitalist' framework that can offer the potential for a more appropriate structure for the achievement of a socially just society. Such a viewpoint ultimately represents a capitalist approach to challenging and demolishing the egalitarian arguments and implications of the left-leaning social justice theorists and academics, instead emphasising '*the mutual dependence between the free market and the community*'<sup>239</sup> in creating and sustaining a more just social order in the long-term. Originating within 20<sup>th</sup> century and specifically post-war western Germany and with strong continental links, the concept of the social market has led to the emergence in recent years of significant think-tanks such as the 'Social Market Foundation'<sup>240</sup> (founded 1989), seeking to specifically influence the development of both social and economic policy within contemporary British politics, and in the process seeking to steer policy-making towards a

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<sup>238</sup> Keith Joseph and Jonathan Sumption, *Equality*, (W & J MacKay, Chatham, 1979), Ch.5, p.89

<sup>239</sup> David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, (Penguin, London, 1992), Ch.8. p.112

<sup>240</sup> See Social Market Foundation:

<http://www.smf.co.uk/>

mixed economy, with a less statist focus and a more economically-liberal direction where possible. This concept, focusing on the development of a choice-based quasi-market within the provision of public services, has been influential in shaping the contemporary political debate within the modern Conservative Party and its revised approach to how the state delivers key public policies. This has been particularly prevalent during the post-Thatcher era, with many of the party's modernisers recognising the importance of maintaining capitalist free-market values, while at the same time acknowledging the importance of stabilising community structures in a way that was perhaps overlooked during the Thatcher hegemony of the 1980s.

### **The New Right and the Neo-Liberal view of Social Justice**

Social justice is subsequently a dynamic term that is open to interpretation within political circles, and this ambiguity means that its meaning in practice has generated significant disagreements throughout the course of the modern political era. In basic terms those on the left of politics envisage a direct and essential role for the state in creating greater social justice, while those on the right argue for a less 'statist' or 'interventionist' approach, with less regulation and more reliance on the laws of the free market. Indeed, within the Conservative Party, a fairly new tradition of conservatism has sought to promote a significantly revised version of the concept, namely The 'New Right' Thatcherites who actively contributed to ending the 'years of consensus' from the mid-1970s onwards by vigorously promoting the merits of a more marketised approach to public service delivery (and in turn creating a 'social market'), at the expense of a universalised and generously state-funded welfare provision and its associated attempts to deliver social justice. This viewpoint argues that laissez-faire capitalism is incompatible with a traditional 'liberal-left' social justice agenda where the interventionist nature of the state is viewed as a vital tool for achieving the desired outcome of greater equality. Many within the New Right tradition such as Hayek, Friedman and Thatcher have therefore interpreted '*social justice as social welfare*'<sup>241</sup> in the context of its practical application, and as a result have attached to it some

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<sup>241</sup> Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996), Ch.10, p.389

associated negative implications in terms of its conventional application for contemporary society.

The ultimate ideological thrust that has attempted to reduce the power and expenditure of the modern state and its attempts to shape social justice as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed can be found in the legacy of F.A Hayek, a key philosophical and ideological influence on the evolution of Conservative social and economic policy-making, particularly during the era of Margaret Thatcher's administration in the 1980s. The Austrian economist Hayek has been a notable influence within the specific 'neo-liberal' economic tradition of modern Conservatism, forming part of the broader New Right agenda that has promoted a smaller role for the state in both economic and social policy matters has sought intellectual succour from the Hayekian perspective in pursuing this political outlook<sup>242</sup>. In promoting a socio-political agenda that was an '*amalgamation of economic liberty and social conventionalism*'<sup>243</sup>, Hayek had a key role in instigating a distinct agenda for both British and international Conservatism in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in the face of a statist, socialist onslaught after World War Two. The New Right has derived particular inspiration and guidance from Hayek's distinct and somewhat unorthodox revised analysis of the concept of 'social justice', which condemned the left-of-centre interpretation of it as representing a paradox and a 'mirage' that was not as attainable or desirable as those on the 'socialist' left of politics claimed it to be. The Hayekian 'Austrian school' view ultimately argues that the conventional view of social justice with its emphasis on an active state is an illusion constructed to suit a specific political agenda framed by interventionist social democrats, and it can subsequently be rejected as a purely hypothetical concept that is fatally flawed on both an intellectual and practical basis, primarily due to its promotion of a socio-political model that is not aligned with economic or social realities or indeed human nature (of the competitive and brutal Hobbesian variant)<sup>244</sup>. This anti-collectivist perspective therefore proclaims that '*there could be no injustice perpetrated against those in poverty*'<sup>245</sup>, given

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<sup>242</sup> See Friedrich von Hayek, *Law, Legislation & Liberty*, Volume 2: *The Mirage of Social Justice*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1973)

<sup>243</sup> Paul Kelly, '*The Big Society in the New Conservatism*', cited in Jason Edwards (ed). *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012), p.32

<sup>244</sup> See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, (1651)

<sup>245</sup> Kevin Hickson, 'Thatcherism, Poverty and Social Justice', *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, (Volume 18, Number 2, June 2010), p.137

that they had reached such a social status not through some punitive consequences of a repressive and deliberate government policy, but rather due to factors such as individual ability, personal circumstances and socio-economic influences beyond their control. From a modern perspective, Hayek's view of social justice can therefore be summarised in contemporary terms as a reflection of the belief that:

*'Returns from the market were not moral returns and we shouldn't see them as moral returns, but if a pop star earns more than a nurse it's not that the pop star is morally superior to a nurse, but it's just that the distribution of economic returns in a market economy does not align and is not supposed to align with a set of moral judgements'*<sup>246</sup>.

This anti-redistributive position rejects rationalist socialist morality along with the egalitarian conclusions of Rawls, ultimately citing that it would drive people towards 'serfdom'<sup>247</sup>. Such a viewpoint has been further espoused in a post-Hayek context particularly by Robert Nozick, whose contemporary intellectual analysis emerged in response to the Rawlsian position, and argued for the *'inherent superiority of markets over all other forms of social organisation'*.<sup>248</sup> Nozick has therefore sought to justify the inevitability and justification of inequality deriving from a 'state of nature' by instilling a moral streak of how 'just' such a scenario was, an ultimate consequence of free exchange and varying individual abilities within the free market environment<sup>249</sup>. Within such a context, Gamble's 'free economy' that depicts how the Thatcherite socio-economic model of society emerged during the 1980s is therefore said to have been achieved by a significantly reduced role for government and greater individual freedoms and less state regulation as a result, and this in turn provides the principled framework for an associated neo-liberal version of social justice that was *'achieved through the daily plebiscite in the market'*<sup>250</sup> rather than the interventionism of politicians in pursuit of 'artificial'

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<sup>246</sup> David Willetts MP, interview with author, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012

<sup>247</sup> F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1944)

<sup>248</sup> Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn., 1994), Ch.2, p.58

<sup>249</sup> See Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, (Basic Books, New York, USA, 1974)

<sup>250</sup> Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn., 1994), Ch.2, p.57

redistribution of resources. Neo-liberals such as Hayek alongside the more libertarian outlook of Nozick therefore developed a critique that alluded to a perception that social justice was a 'mirage' in its traditional liberal sense, claiming it to be an empty and meaningless doctrine due to its emphasis on rewarding individuals in accordance with an artificial and socially-imposed (statist) moral framework, rather than focusing on their talent and variable individual abilities which are allowed to ultimately flourish by the economic liberalism of the free-market. In turn the neo-liberal New Right has proposed its own morality-fused framework to generate an alternative version of social justice, one that was essentially market-driven and that '*was buttressed by the revival of moral arguments against equality*'<sup>251</sup>. In adopting this distinct and more unconventional interpretation of social justice and eroding the liberal-left's moral monopoly regarding the concept in the process, this libertarian analysis has sought to fundamentally challenge the subjective liberal morality that has bolstered the traditional interpretation of the concept, arguing that if '*the moral merit of each individual is hidden, and can be known by no one*'<sup>252</sup>, then on such a basis how can the state have sufficient knowledge to determine how social justice should be formulated and goods redistributed in the wider social interest?

Clearly rejecting the potentially egalitarian and redistributive principles of 'natural' justice imposed by Rawls several decades later, Hayek's own argument dismisses the artificial nature of the left's version of 'social justice' as the driving force behind its idealised model of welfare policy, with the New Right concluding that such an approach inevitably results in a bloated and bureaucratic model of a welfare state. The Hayekian model instead promotes an idealised 'neo-liberal' economic influence in creating the appropriate political model and its associated society, shaped by limited powers of regulatory intervention and which in turn moulds a revamped 'New Right' version of social justice which demands that the market is the ultimate determinant of people's wealth and status, featuring dynamics that are driven by individual spontaneity and economic liberalism, not the 'dead hand' of the monolithic state<sup>253</sup>. This interpretation of social justice therefore places ultimate faith in

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<sup>251</sup> Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn., 1994), Ch.2, p.60

<sup>252</sup> Ted Honderich, *Conservatism*, (Penguin Books, London, 1990), Ch.2, p.20

<sup>253</sup> For a full and more modern analysis and critique of this Hayekian model of society, see Raymond Plant, *The Neo-Liberal State*, (Oxford University Press, 2009)

the forces of laissez-faire capitalism and a less regulated state as being the best and most effective guarantors of a fair and 'socially just' outcome, working from the basis that the very concept of social justice is '*a vague and contested idea*'<sup>254</sup>. The neo-liberal view of social justice therefore seeks to allow individuals to achieve their most appropriate socio-economic status on the basis of merit, while being fundamentally aligned with a model of government that promotes the dynamism of a 'free economy'<sup>255</sup> and a minimised amount of government regulation and intervention in economic matters, *for 'using the welfare state to realize an ideal of social justice is, for neoliberals, an abuse of power'*<sup>256</sup>. Critical academics such as Raymond Plant<sup>257</sup> who approach neo-liberalism from a left-of-centre perspective and who believe it will eventually succumb to a more social democratic outcome, have viewed the concept of a wholly neo-liberal state with some significant scepticism and identify unstable elements within it in terms of delivering practical and effective governance.

Such a neo-liberal analysis and approach to social justice therefore views such regulation of economic activity as an unnecessary encroachment on individual freedom, while also rejecting what is viewed as an 'artificial' redistribution of wealth as advocated by the social democratic model of welfare provision. According to free-market critics, the left's approach to delivering social justice is hindered by the often bloated size and structure of the state bureaucracy that is an essential corollary for achieving this socio-economic aspiration. As a consequence, for much of the post-war period, Conservatives claim that social justice and greater equality have not been achieved in the way the liberal left have desired it to be. The Hayekian and 'New Right' analysis has subsequently identified fundamental problems in achieving the conventional (liberal) post-war version of social justice by its reliance on utilising a bureaucratic and 'statist' model of government and embracing 'social-democratic' principles and associated political institutions as the key tools for achieving such a socially 'just' outcome. New Right thinkers and academics have

<sup>254</sup> John Gray, 'Book Review: *The Neoliberal State* by Raymond Plant', *The New Statesman*, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2010, <http://www.newstatesman.com/non-fiction/2010/01/neoliberal-state-market-social>

<sup>255</sup> See Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1988)

<sup>256</sup> John Gray, 'Book Review: *The Neoliberal State* by Raymond Plant', *The New Statesman*, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2010, <http://www.newstatesman.com/non-fiction/2010/01/neoliberal-state-market-social>

<sup>257</sup> See R. Plant, *The Neo-Liberal State*, (Oxford University Press, 2009)

therefore dismissed the state's proposed regulatory role in such matters as forming the basis of an analysis that is deeply flawed in terms of explaining and tackling social inequality and injustice. Writing about the neo-liberal state from a more left-of-centre political angle, Plant has subsequently observed a core belief of this viewpoint that there is a cheaper and more efficient alternative to the interventionist state's approach to enhancing social justice, namely:

*'The neo-liberal state on the contrary without such a distributive agenda is committed to a more objective and less expansive form of safety net welfare provision'*<sup>258</sup>.

Such a neo-liberal model therefore rejects the redistributive capacity of the state along with its associated bureaucracy, and in turn ultimately questions whether the conventional interpretation of 'social justice' and its associated and subjective formulation of the welfare state is a legitimate basis by which society can function or be driven, as:

*'Since only situations which have been created by humans can be called just or unjust..... what is called 'social' or 'distributive' justice is indeed meaningless within a spontaneous order'*<sup>259</sup>.

Hayek ultimately devised this rather original and unconventional alternative analysis of the modern social-democratic variant of social justice and simultaneously defended individualism in the face of a 'statist' onslaught, defying the socio-political orthodoxy of post-war British politics in the process. Hayek was therefore said to have '*placed social democrats on the defensive*'<sup>260</sup> in seeking to justify their previously dominant and subjective interpretation and manipulation of social justice and the perception that it was an appropriate theory to address the accepted social injustices of contemporary society, even going as far as questioning the very practical meaning of the concept. During the 1980s in

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<sup>258</sup> Raymond Plant, *The Neo-Liberal State*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009), Ch.7, p.153

<sup>259</sup> Friedrich von Hayek, *Law, Legislation & Liberty*, Volume 2: *The Mirage of Social Justice*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1973), Ch.8. p.33

<sup>260</sup> Kevin Hickson, 'Thatcherism, Poverty and Social Justice', *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, (Volume 18, Number 2, June 2010) p.136

particular, this 'neo-liberal' critique of social justice was revitalized and proved to be highly influential within the dominant political administrations of Thatcher in Britain and Reagan in the USA. Subsequently, during the 1980s when the Thatcher government and its distinct political agenda dominated the British political landscape, this background theoretical framework offered a wholly individualistic and somewhat unorthodox interpretation of social justice, with the 'New Right' in government practically challenging its traditional definition in the process, as follows:

*'Any form of distribution of social goods not based on individual attainment, which would introduce compensatory elements or appeal to a collective social responsibility, is excluded from the intention of social justice'.<sup>261</sup>*

This approach therefore sought to fundamentally re-assess the perceived reasons for the existence of poverty and inequality within wider British society, along with the established mechanisms for dealing with it. Indeed as the decade progressed, such an approach to this aspect of government policy-making created a political landscape that featured a '*distinctively Thatcherite approach to poverty and social justice*'<sup>262</sup>, offering an ostensibly more objective viewpoint that contemptuously dismissed social democrats as being motivated by the 'politics of envy' in their advocacy of the mantra of social justice as a means of ameliorating long-term poverty. At the same time, 'One Nation' Conservatives were dismissed for their implicit justification for redistributive social justice, an attitude fuelled by their heightened social consciences and a degree of paternalistic guilt at having levels of wealth that the majority of the population did not. It was in the context of such a legacy that members of the Major administration of the 1990s, including ministers with politically moderate reputations such as William Waldegrave, appeared buoyed by the ideological conflict and eventual victory of the previous decade and were therefore arguing for a fairly radical review of traditional social and welfare policies, primarily:

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<sup>261</sup> Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996), Ch.10, p.390

<sup>262</sup> Kevin Hickson, 'Thatcherism, Poverty and Social Justice', *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, (Volume 18, Number 2, June 2010), p.135



*'a move towards the insurance principle, together with an element of compulsion- i.e. people being obliged to provide for themselves'*<sup>263</sup>.

This fairly radical revised policy agenda broadly sought to explore the development of continental models of national insurance along with inspiration from the American individualist welfare model, as opposed to the post-war British focus on universal welfare and associated social policies. This approach represented a notable shift of mood in this policy area, appearing to represent an ideological victory for the influence of the 'New Right' during the 1980s. It was therefore an increasingly common demand from radical and open-minded thinkers within both the Conservative Party and the fledgling New Labour movement in the mid-1990s, and such developments align with the view of some academics who argue that the Conservative approach to dealing with *'poverty and social justice actually became more radical after 1990'*<sup>264</sup>, in its rejection and scepticism towards the hegemonic role of the state as the sole provider of welfare provision. The escalation of this school of thought as the 1990s progressed is evident of the relatively low-profile viewpoint (in defiance of the critical and pessimistic perception of the Thatcherites), that John Major was in fact a more effective and practical advocate than his predecessor in pursuing the neo-liberal approach to public service provision and in turn embracing the 'New Right' version of social justice<sup>265</sup>, and this is perhaps evident in the argument that *'a process of ideological realignment..... occurred during the Conservative leadership of John Major'*<sup>266</sup>, suggesting that the party became more confident and uniform in its free-market rhetoric and focus.

The essential Hayekian influence that sought to shape such political developments was the notion that *'government activity (to be) limited primarily to establishing the framework within which individuals are free to pursue their objectives'*<sup>267</sup>, and this

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<sup>263</sup> William Waldegrave, (Chief Secretary to the Treasury), Interview with Hugo Young, 15 July 1996, cited in *The Hugo Young Papers: A Journalist's Notes from the Heart of Politics*, Ion Trewin (ed.), (Penguin, London, 2009), p.490

<sup>264</sup> Kevin Hickson, 'Thatcherism, Poverty and Social Justice', *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, (Volume 18, Number 2, June 2010) , p.142

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., p.142

<sup>266</sup> Heppell, T. and Hill, M., 'Ideological Typologies of Contemporary British Conservatism', (2005), *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 3, p.353

<sup>267</sup> Milton Friedman. *Introduction to the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of "The Road to Serfdom"* (1994), p.xi

automatically implies a limited role of the state, along with a reduced financial and bureaucratic scope. This view clearly saw the importance of a basic government role to provide the outline framework of state activity, but with a broader and more explicit degree of individual freedom existing within such a sphere of relative autonomy. While the Thatcher era sought to earnestly embrace and pursue such principles of socio-economic conservatism, the twenty years that followed from 1990 were perhaps less consistently loyal to this Hayekian vision of the world, particularly in relation to the increased curve of public spending that developed the longer that Labour was in power. Following the 2010 General Election result, while not necessarily endorsing Hayek's vision of a shrunken state with the same enthusiasm of the Thatcherites in the early 1980s, Cameron and his Liberal Democrat coalition partners were provided with the opportunity to transform their vocal criticisms of Labour's legacy of 'statism' and ongoing welfare dependency into the concrete implementation of their own distinct political remedies for the country's various social ills.

### **Civic Conservatism**

Such a burgeoning alternative debate in relation to the traditional interpretation of social justice and conventional post-war British welfare provision developed throughout the 1990s and continues to generate lively political discussion up to the present day. However, despite this attempt to construct alternative views of welfare provision and a radically different interpretation of social justice during their eighteen years of dominant political rule (1979-97), contemporary political opponents of the Conservative Party during this period were unimpressed and somewhat sceptical as to how wider society and civic community interests were positively served by the Conservative Party's more 'neo-liberal' and less 'statist' approach to government delivery of social policy. The clear suggestion from political opponents was therefore that as a consequence of such an economics-driven political agenda, social and welfare policy was somewhat neglected and this has been evident in comments from rival political figures from the modern era:

*'He (Ashdown) thinks the Tories are utterly bereft of any ideas about society/community. Willetts and his Civic Conservatism<sup>268</sup> is the exception- but they don't want to know'<sup>269</sup>.*

Such comments indicate how attempts to re-brand and re-ignite the Conservative Party's distinct interpretation of 'society', social justice and innovative social policy-making both during and after the Thatcher era have been dismissed by opposition politicians as being devoid of coherence and direction. However, the 'Civic Conservatism' referred to above did emerge as something with sufficient distinction to engage the attention of the political classes, as a post-Thatcher theory devised in the 1990s by the Conservative politician David Willetts, a cerebral figure with a background as a political advisor and with the reputation as an 'intellectual', a factor that ostensibly provided some credibility to the theory. Willetts' model of 'civic conservatism' sought to articulate an alternative model of a 'civil society' that focused on the significance of the relationship between the individual and key political institutions (as opposed to just the monolithic state). Such a 'civic' focus therefore sought to free individual citizens from the tentacles of excessive state regulation and control, while also not being wholly reliant on the neo-liberal laissez-faire ethos of free-market economics, and which valued the importance of individual civil action, community activity (localism) and greater diversity of public service provision in relation to the potentially dominant powers of the all-encompassing state. It ultimately sought to restore the public's faith in the Conservative Party's approach to the management and delivery of key public services, for the principal reason that in the dying days of the Major government in the mid-1990s, *'the Conservative Party was perceived by the voters as indifferent or even hostile to public services'*<sup>270</sup>. In espousing this reformist position Willetts appeared to signal a rejection of the Thatcher mantra of the late 1980s that *"there was no such thing as society"*, despite having

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<sup>268</sup> David Willetts, *Civic Conservatism*, (The Social Market Foundation, London, 1994)

<sup>269</sup> Paddy Ashdown (Liberal Democrat Leader 1988—1999), Interview with Hugo Young, 13 September 1994, cited in *The Hugo Young Papers: A Journalist's Notes from the Heart of Politics*, Ion Trewin (ed.), (Penguin, London, 2009), p.433

<sup>270</sup> Matthew D'Ancona, *'Ditching their modernisation campaign was the Tories' worst strategic error since the poll tax'*, The Daily Telegraph. 30th December 2012, [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/matthewd\\_ancona/9770645/Ditching-their-modernisation-campaign-was-the-Tories-worst-strategic-error-since-the-poll-tax.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/matthewd_ancona/9770645/Ditching-their-modernisation-campaign-was-the-Tories-worst-strategic-error-since-the-poll-tax.html)

An edited version of Matthew D'Ancona's chapter in Ryan Shorthouse (ed.), *Tory modernisation 2.0: the future of the Conservative Party*, (Bright Blue, London, 2013), e-book: <http://brightblue.org.uk/bbtory20.pdf>

a reputation as a figure from the right-wing of the party. During the New Labour era from 1997, Willetts developed this critique and offered specific criticisms of *'New Labour's reliance on the state and public spending'*, instead seeking to emphasise the important role of *'the voluntary efforts of citizens themselves'*<sup>271</sup>. Within this context, there subsequently emerged a revised and adapted shape to this specific vision of Conservative social policy, rejecting the monolithic state yet embracing the value of 'society' and the need for viable and good quality public services, while fusing individualism and the power of community-driven actions in an appropriate balance. This would ultimately create a distinct message when formulating social and welfare policies, namely:

*'the need to show that such a thing as Civic Conservatism exists and is vital. A real difference between the parties'*<sup>272</sup>.

Willetts' role in this evolution of 'civic conservatism' and a new variant of social policy was a significant one given that he appeared to be revising his one-time Thatcherite scepticism of the traditional social-democrat interpretation of social justice. However, this approach did not represent a point-blank acceptance of the traditional liberal variant of this concept, but instead reflected an ongoing pragmatic right-of-centre need to devise a new and distinctive approach to the role of the community, wider 'society' and the interpretation of social justice and a subsequent formulation of appropriate social policies to reflect the changing socio-political landscape. As the 1990s progressed, there was a growing perception among political opponents in particular that Margaret Thatcher's administration had appeared to express a degree of neglect and *'indifference to social justice'*<sup>273</sup> during its eleven and-a-half years in office, and as a consequence the Conservative Party's attitude to this concept lacked clarity and focus in comparison to the New Labour agenda that sought to promote it more explicitly and vigorously from the mid-1990s onwards. This somewhat negative image and attitude towards such a pivotal political concept lingered on and attached itself to the Conservative Party throughout the 1990s and

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<sup>271</sup> Nick Ellison, 'The Conservative Party and Public Expenditure', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.2, p.58

<sup>272</sup> William Waldegrave, (Minister of Agriculture), Interview with Hugo Young, 6 October 1994, cited in *The Hugo Young Papers: A Journalist's Notes from the Heart of Politics*, (Penguin, 2009), p.436

<sup>273</sup> Tom Bower, *Gordon Brown*, (Harper-Collins, London, 2004), Ch.3, p.102

beyond, generating some electoral unpopularity in the process, as *'the Conservative Party..... seemed for some time unable to learn the lessons of defeat in 1997 and to move away from its Thatcherite position and its influences on the development of social policy within the Conservative Party'* <sup>274</sup>. 'Civic Conservatism' was therefore the initial and formative response in re-moulding party policy in this specific sphere, seeking to offer a more balanced and less 'statist' political approach, yet which nevertheless retained its own basic principles and a focus on 'community' as a compromise concept that was opposed to the rival poles of rampant 'statism' and libertarian 'individualism'. This desire to instil the importance of enhanced individual civil choice in relation to the power of the state (a legacy of the Thatcher era), would also have a significant bearing and a moderating influence over the New Labour approach to welfare and social policy provision from 1997 onwards.

The emergence of New Labour from the mid-1990s onwards, followed by its subsequent convincing accession to power in 1997, accelerated the need for the modernising and reforming elements within the Conservative Party to re-visit the party's conventional and well-established position on maintaining low taxation and resisting increased public spending that had been cemented during the 1980s, due to increasing evidence *'that the public were increasingly willing to see increased public expenditure and improved public services rather than tax cuts'* <sup>275</sup>. In reaction to such socio-political developments, and implicitly challenging the Thatcherite legacy in the process as part of a more long-term strategic perspective to formulating a coherent approach to this policy area, the post-2005 Cameron Conservatives in particular appeared to pragmatically modify their attitude towards the more traditional and mainstream interpretation of social justice and its associated policy-making implications, as opposed to completely rejecting it out of hand. This has involved acknowledging that it has some positive aspects, and in reacting to the New Labour agenda from 1997 and the longer-term centre-left traditions of the British welfare state model, this revised Conservative approach has been clearly evident in recent comments by some of the party's prominent politicians:

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<sup>274</sup> Hugh Bochel, *'Cameron's Conservatism: influences, interpretations and implications'*, University of Lincoln (2010), p.1

[http://www.social-policy.org.uk/lincoln/Bochel\\_H.pdf](http://www.social-policy.org.uk/lincoln/Bochel_H.pdf)

<sup>275</sup> Hugh Bochel, 'Conservative approaches to social policy since 1997', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.1, p.13

*“At its best, New Labour was recognition that the values of enterprise and aspiration could be fused with commitment to social justice and fairness. The party that best represents that fusion now is David Cameron’s Conservative Party.”*<sup>276</sup>

Such fulsome praise for New Labour’s emphasis and clear focus on social justice as voiced by Michael Gove, a ‘modernising’ Conservative politician viewed as a key ally of David Cameron’s and part of the inner circle of his leadership, appeared to transmit a clear message that the Conservatives would embrace many post-1997 social policy initiatives, while seeking to instil their own enterprising agenda into the political formula. Within such a context, Cameron has subsequently been described as being *‘more open than his predecessors to socially inclusive welfare policies’*<sup>277</sup>, and as a result both he and his frontbenchers have utilised the associated political language and vocabulary. This evolutionary and modernised political attitude has reflected the party’s adherence to a more centrist and ‘social’ political agenda since Cameron gained the leadership in 2005. Indeed, the use of such ‘Blairite’ and ‘social democratic’ language and the acknowledged policy fusion of enterprise with interventionist social justice have appeared to represent a resurrection of Cameron’s previous claim when seeking the party leadership that he was *“heir to Blair”*<sup>278</sup>. Such an explicit willingness to focus on and talk about the concept of social justice on Labour’s territory as it were, signalled a dilution of the Thatcherite tradition and the view of society as inspired by both F.A Hayek and Enoch Powell in particular, both *‘anti-collectivist thinkers..... who were fundamentally opposed to this idea’*<sup>279</sup> (of social justice). This revised stance in the sphere of social policy among the Conservative ‘modernising’ tendency, which appears aligned with a more moralistic and communitarian outlook, had initially originated in a public context in mid-2005, when prior to becoming party leader

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<sup>276</sup> Michael Gove, Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, cited in James Kirkup, *‘Michael Gove says Cameron’s Conservatives are the heirs to New Labour’*, Daily Telegraph, March 16th 2010, <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/jameskirkup/100030201/michael-gove-says-camerons-conservatives-are-the-heirs-to-new-labour/>

<sup>277</sup> Rob Baggott, ‘Conservative health policy’, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *‘The Conservative Party and Social Policy’*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.5, p.89

<sup>278</sup> Andrew Pierce, *‘Horror as Cameron brandishes the B word’*, The Times, October 25<sup>th</sup> 2005, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article574814.ece>

<sup>279</sup> Robert M. Page, *‘The Conservative Party and the Welfare State since 1945’*, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.2, p.36

Cameron stated: “*We do think there’s such thing as society, we just don’t think it’s the same as the state*”<sup>280</sup>, a provocative rebuke to the much-quoted sentiments expressed by Margaret Thatcher in 1987. However, the modernising Conservatives of the Cameron era do not endorse the more explicitly egalitarian implications and consequences of ‘social justice’ as it is viewed by the traditional left, and the record of the previous Labour government in this key policy sphere has been condemned as being ‘*greatly flawed*’<sup>281</sup>, indicating an explicit rejection of the liberal-left’s broad approach to achieving social justice.

This apparent repositioning on social policy issues has raised issues as to whether the modern Conservative Party has a markedly different approach to this subject than the last period of Conservative government, or whether its policy proposals are more an example of style over substance. In this context, Cameron’s greater willingness to talk about poverty and social issues can be interpreted as an implicit criticism of the somewhat limited Thatcherite social agenda and outlook that was established during the 1980s, and an attempt to soften and re-define the Conservatives’ image on social policies in the process. In doing so, this modern Conservative outlook relating to social policy has sought to promote a new model of Civic Conservatism for the 21st century and in doing so detach the party from the primarily hostile interpretation of social justice that was provoked among many Conservatives of Thatcherite pedigree, who have feared that the party’s focus on what they perceive to be such vague concepts has symbolised a retreat from traditional Conservative values within shifting political attitudes and developments. Instead there has been instilled a communitarian emphasis that indicates a more positive view of human nature, although one observer has appeared to adopt a more sceptical view that not much has changed from the 1980s in relation to such matters and that *‘The ‘Big Society’ concept that Cameron is promoting is an attempt to reject Thatcherism in the eyes of the voting public, while reaffirming it in practice*’<sup>282</sup>.

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<sup>280</sup> David Cameron, speech to Policy Exchange think tank, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2005, cited in Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010), Ch.4, p.72

<sup>281</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.3, p.43

<sup>282</sup> Matthew West, ‘*Comment: Cameron’s Thatcherite manifesto*’, Politics.co.uk, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010, <http://www.politics.co.uk/comment-analysis/2010/04/13/comment-cameron-s-thatcherite-manifesto>

Despite the above interpretation that Thatcherism remains a potent presence, such bold expressions of modern and 'new' Conservatism have appeared to unsettle the party's New Right and neo-liberal elements who view such a modernised and revamped interpretation and acknowledgment of social justice and 'society' as an unnecessary concession to the 'collectivist' left of centre political tradition in the UK, moving in the direction of Blair's New Labour agenda and a departure from the free-market legacy of the 1980s. The New Right viewpoint fundamentally believes that social justice should not be about statist, egalitarian 'levelling' and intervention, but rather develop in line with more traditional Conservative values of '*incentives, self reliance and independence*',<sup>283</sup> promoting meritocracy and embracing a downgraded and minimalist role for the state in the process. The alternative emphasis of a more regulated approach to the delivery of social policy and social justice from the centre, with a detachment from the more ruggedly individualist Conservative values of the Thatcher era, was evident within the social policy agenda of New Labour since 1997, and has been an influence on David Cameron's approach to this policy area since 2005. Right-wing fears that Cameron was absorbing too much of New Labour's approach on this issue led to a subsequent revival of the New Right's critique of '*a social justice that ran counter to nature*'<sup>284</sup>, with its explicit rejection of statist, interventionist tendencies seeking to engineer individual social fortunes and conditions. In embracing the vocabulary and language of the New Labour agenda in this policy sphere (in rhetorical terms at least), Cameron's approach has sought to make the Conservative Party more attractive to floating voters, but in doing so has threatened to alienate a specific faction of his own party.

Ultimately, Michael Gove's complimentary sentiments about New Labour and their influence on the evolution of modern Conservatism, while being somewhat provocative in terms of internal Conservative Party politics, are broadly consistent with the overall political agenda and 'de-toxification' strategy of David Cameron since he became Conservative Leader in December 2005. This has been further evident in speeches by the Conservative Leader himself where similarly-toned language has been regularly used:

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<sup>283</sup> Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996), Ch.10, p.394

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch.10, p.394



*'The first of the policy groups I set up was Iain's, (Duncan Smith) looking at all the full range of social justice issues. For the Conservative Party I'm leading, social justice is a vital issue. The reason is simple: the degree of social injustice in our country'*<sup>285</sup>.

Such words being deliberately used by David Cameron and some of his key political allies, aligned with a background focus on the integral theme of 'society', have therefore formed part of a sustained attempt to 'modernise' and re-position the Conservative Party's image on social policy matters, and in turn consolidating the notion of 'Civic Conservatism' from an early stage of his leadership. In this subsequent evolution of its policy agenda within this specific sphere, the party has indicated its willingness to address and embrace the social justice agenda, yet while also seeking to retain its own distinct interpretation of social justice and develop an innovative and distinct range of social policies accordingly. However, how such theories, rhetoric and ideas have developed and been translated into practical policies is another matter that continues to evolve and develop under the auspices of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government from 2010 onwards.

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<sup>285</sup> David Cameron, 'Speech to Centre for Social Justice Kids' symposium', cited in The Guardian, Monday 10<sup>th</sup> July 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2006/jul/10/conservatives.law>

## Modern Conservatism and Social Justice in Practice

Having assessed the theoretical and philosophical origins of the concept of social justice, this chapter seeks to assess how the term has shaped and influenced modern Conservative Party social policy in practice. Within the context of re-framing the Conservative policy message in both image and rhetorical terms, and aligning them with appropriate theoretical and philosophical influences, actually putting a new and distinct 21<sup>st</sup> century interpretation of 'social justice' into practice has emerged as a key challenge for David Cameron's leadership, both while in political opposition from late 2005 and in power from 2010. The developing narrative and analysis of Britain's 'broken society' has therefore been a central and developing theme of the Cameron era since he became Conservative Party Leader, and this has been a mechanism to allow him to propose his own brand of distinct political solutions and instil an enhanced focus on achieving a more 'just' outcome to society's broad and sustained socio-economic problems such as long-term poverty, poor living conditions, limited social mobility and high levels of crime. One academic observer has remarked that Cameron's approach was fuelled by an acknowledgement that when *'he became Conservative party leader in 2005 he recognized that something was badly wrong with the right, and a new radical conservatism was desperately needed'*<sup>286</sup>, suggesting a new approach to society and related social policy matters, with a degree of acceptance of the need to re-engage with aspects of the 'One Nation' blueprint.

Given that there is an established and historic Conservative philosophical acceptance of inequality as an inevitable consequence of a diverse and variable society, as well as considering the party's post-1979 tendency to prioritise economic policy over social policy issues, Cameron's strategy has perhaps been a bold one to adopt. It has therefore ultimately sought to create a consistent argument that depicts the negative legacy of a sustained period of Labour government as creating a fragmented society that is 'broken' and ill at ease with itself in many social aspects, exacerbated by the excessive and often counter-

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<sup>286</sup> Philip Blond, *'David Cameron has lost his chance to redefine the Tories'*, Comment is Free, The Guardian, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/03/cameron-one-nation-u-turn-tory-tragedy>

productive interventions of a costly and inefficient welfare state<sup>287</sup>. While the outgoing Labour administration of 2010 vehemently disputed this critical analysis of its own socio-economic record in policy terms and indeed attacked the Thatcher legacy for similar reasons, Cameron has displayed a degree of audacity and tenacity in pursuing this particular political agenda, particularly given that he was encroaching on established Labour political territory and simultaneously venturing into an area of traditional Conservative weakness in policy terms. In therefore seeking to move away from perceptions of Conservative indifference to such social policy matters and re-align both the party's wider image and its overall policy direction, Cameron has also created some significant internal tensions within his own party, particularly among Thatcherite figures such as ex-Cabinet minister John Redwood, who have preferred a more 'dry' economic slant to the evolution and direction of overall government policy,<sup>288</sup> focusing on cuts in taxation and fiscal retrenchment rather than the greater emphasis on society, social issues and the potential additional public expenditure and image of 'big government' that are traditionally associated with such a specific socio-political perspective.

### **The Centre for Social Justice- Addressing the 'broken society' and promoting social justice?**

Within this particular analysis of a fractured and unsettled British social model, Cameron has been active in calling for a fundamental re-assessment of various aspects of the welfare state and has advocated significant and wide-ranging welfare reforms in order to tackle the deep-seated causes of poverty and dependency, arguing that New Labour ultimately failed in this respect, despite making bold promises to the contrary and pledging to "*think the unthinkable*" on welfare reform when it was elected in 1997. Such criticism of the established institutional structures of the British state, the need for radical welfare reform along with renewed social policy initiatives goes to the heart *'of the Conservative Party's*

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<sup>287</sup> David Cameron, 'Let's mend our broken society', 27th April 2010, [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/04/David\\_Cameron\\_Lets\\_mend\\_our\\_broken\\_society.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/04/David_Cameron_Lets_mend_our_broken_society.aspx)

<sup>288</sup> See Melissa Kite, 'David Cameron's Conservatives must cut tax and spending, say policy chiefs', The Daily Telegraph, 23rd August 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/2609774/David-Camerons-Conservatives-must-cut-tax-and-spending-say-policy-chiefs.html>

John Redwood was joint chair of David Cameron's policy commission on the economy while in opposition.

*relationship with the post-war welfare state*<sup>289</sup>, a relationship that has been uneasy at times in seeking to both preserve the provision of core public services yet reforming them simultaneously in order for them to ostensibly flourish in the long-term. Such reform often has radical and politically difficult implications, and pivotal to this approach in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century has been the indefatigable desire of Conservatism to limit and reduce the prevailing and often hegemonic ‘statist’ flavour of Labour’s management of the welfare state, and instead develop a political culture whereby:

*‘Entrepreneurial innovation is to be extended to social policy and the reform of the welfare state by enhancing the role of social entrepreneurs in the voluntary sector’.*<sup>290</sup>

This challenge of securing adequate public service provision but without a ‘big government’ model of delivery subsequently emerged as one of the fundamental challenges and driving factors of Cameron’s leadership from its earliest phase. In order to provide substance to his developing policy rhetoric, Cameron swiftly established six groups with a brief to formulate new policy ideas for a future Conservative government. The groups convened from late 2005 onwards, and one prominent body was the Social Justice Policy group, led by former party leader Iain Duncan Smith, whose burgeoning interest in poverty, welfare policy and social reform had led to his pivotal involvement in helping to establish the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ)<sup>291</sup> in 2004 to develop original policies and initiatives to deal with wider social policy, reform of the welfare system and identifying the root causes of long-term poverty. The attention to this policy area has won him praise from political colleagues, with David Willetts stating that *‘Iain Duncan Smith deserves a lot of credit for (introducing) social justice.....back into Conservative thinking’*<sup>292</sup>. Duncan Smith therefore

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<sup>289</sup> Simon Lee, ‘David Cameron’s Political Challenges’, cited in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.1, p.13

<sup>290</sup> Simon Lee, ‘Convergence, Critique and Divergence: The Development of Economic Policy under David Cameron’, cited in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.5, p.78

<sup>291</sup> See:

<http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/>

<sup>292</sup> David Willetts MP, interview with author, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012

aspired to be the champion of a revived model of ‘Compassionate Conservatism’ and within this context:

*‘Reforming the public services and helping the “vulnerable” in society were to become his mission..... (which) stemmed in part from his Christianity and sense of social justice’<sup>293</sup>.*

Following over 3,000 hours of public consultation and after receiving submissions from over 2,000 different organisations, Duncan Smith’s policy group published two reports in 2006 and 2007<sup>294</sup>, reflecting a distinctive and revised emphasis to the Conservative Party’s welfare policy agenda, evident in the document ‘Breakthrough Britain’:

*‘Breakthrough Britain advocates a new approach to welfare in the 21st century. We believe that, in order to reverse social breakdown, we need to start reinforcing the Welfare Society. The Welfare Society is that which delivers welfare beyond the State’<sup>295</sup>.*

Such specific language of a ‘welfare society’, as opposed to the more bureaucratic perception of the ‘welfare state’ was an important differentiation of vocabulary, which chimed in with the similar sentiments and vocabulary of the recently–installed Conservative leader and his focus on addressing social injustice, tackling the ‘broken society’ and the evolution of his later focus on the ‘big society’. This renewed social agenda was therefore an attempt to simultaneously emphasise the renewed Conservative agenda in this policy sphere and also revitalise the Conservative Party’s wider public image:

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<sup>293</sup> Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon, ‘The Barren Years: 1997-2005’, cited in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *Recovering Power: The Conservatives in Opposition Since 1867*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005), Ch.11, p.260

<sup>294</sup> See ‘*Breakdown Britain: Interim Report on the State of the Nation*’, The Centre for Social Justice (2006), <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/default.asp?pageRef=180>  
‘*Breakthrough Britain: Ending the Costs of Social Breakdown*’- *Policy Recommendations to the Conservative Party*, The Centre for Social Justice (2007),

<http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/family%20breakdown.pdf>

<sup>295</sup> ‘*Breakthrough Britain: Ending the Costs of Social Breakdown*’- *Policy Recommendations to the Conservative Party*, The Centre for Social Justice (2007), Iain Duncan Smith, Chairman’s Overview, page 6  
<http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/overview.pdf>

*‘Under Cameron, the idea of the “broken society” was being used to help dispel the impression that the Conservative Party, by its own admission, was the “nasty party” of British politics’<sup>296</sup>.*

In summary, the findings of Duncan Smith’s Social Justice Group were the first clear indicator in a generation that the Conservatives were embarking on a renewed and concerted effort to develop a distinct approach to the broad area of social and welfare policy, and its findings could be broadly summarised as emphasising:

*‘the importance of marriage and strong family values and the need to reverse the dependency culture’<sup>297</sup>.*

The specific focus on the perceived stabilising influences of marriage and conventional family values has raised questions as to how new or original the new policy agenda was, namely whether it was merely a reversion to Neo-Conservative social values and traditionalist policies that were additionally fused with distinct moral guidelines, an approach that can be aligned to the influence of American-based academics such as Lawrence Mead<sup>298</sup>, whose work in this sphere over recent years has rejected the entitlement aspect within welfare benefit as a means of addressing long-term unemployment, i.e. questioning whether receipt of state benefit is, under specific conditions, an automatic social right of citizenship in contemporary western society. This approach has sought to introduce conditionality into receipt of welfare support, and has pursued an alternative model of benefits provision where the state seeks to actively promote enhanced values of citizenship, responsibility and an enhanced work ethic as a condition of the receipt of welfare benefit. Some observers have noted that this more moralistic approach and its identification of an entrenched and poverty-stricken, dependent ‘underclass’ is an interpretation that arguably has some parallels with the neo-liberal socio-

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<sup>296</sup> Stephen Driver, “‘Fixing our Broken Society’: David Cameron’s Post-Thatcherite Social Policy”, cited in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.6, p.80

<sup>297</sup> Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010), Ch.4, p.75

<sup>298</sup> See Lawrence M. Mead, *Beyond Entitlement: the Social Obligations of Citizenship*, (Free Press, New York, 1986)

economic analysis of American libertarian scholars such as Charles Murray<sup>299</sup>, who in using US society as a model example, has argued that welfare payments are ultimately harmful to both the individual recipients and wider society in the long-term, and that it is therefore desirable to remove welfare provision altogether as an incentive for people to work. Such a morality-infused focus on conditionality has proved to be a controversial concept for the British welfare debate, and this approach involves a degree of pro-active reciprocity from the welfare recipient, with such a policy agenda supposedly aimed at addressing the inadequacies and moral failings of those who are unemployed for a long period of time by motivating them to find work through the fear of losing their welfare support completely. This influence has emerged in policy terms in the way it appears to have partially shaped and influenced the welfare to work and workfare agenda promoted by both Labour and Conservative politicians from the 1990s onwards.

However while no-one in the senior Conservative hierarchy has publicly or practically promoted such extreme examples of welfare conditionality either in opposition or since returning to power in 2010, there has been evidence of a more moralistic approach and emphasis to welfare policy, namely from the Centre for Social Justice. Whether this attitude is compatible with a greater overall 'compassion' remains to be seen, and although the origins and originality of this agenda are a source of some dispute, there has certainly been an enhanced focus by Cameron's Conservatives on social policy and within that, a more individualistic, decentralised and less bureaucratic approach to welfare provision. Within this context, in July 2008 David Cameron launched the Conservative Party's 'broken society' initiative into the practical political world at the beginning of the Glasgow East by-election campaign<sup>300</sup>, and this revamped socio-economic stance could ultimately said to have been

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<sup>299</sup> See: Charles Murray, *'Charles Murray and the Underclass: The Developing Debate'*, The IEA Health and Welfare Unit in Association with The Sunday Times (London, November 1996), <http://www.sociology.org.uk/as4p6a.pdf>

<sup>300</sup> David Hencke, Patrick Wintour and Hélène Mulholland, *'Cameron launches Tory "broken society" byelection'*, The Guardian, 7th July 2008,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/jul/07/davidcameron.conservatives>

Cameron's speech at this event stated:

*"But our mission is to repair our broken society - to heal the wounds of poverty, crime, social disorder and deprivation that are steadily making this country a grim and joyless place to live for far too many people. Because while our society is broken today, it is not broken forever. We can and will repair it. We can and will bring hope and aspiration to places where there is resignation and despair."*

Source: [http://conservativehome.blogs.com/torydiary/files/fixing\\_our\\_broken\\_society.pdf](http://conservativehome.blogs.com/torydiary/files/fixing_our_broken_society.pdf)

significantly influenced by the aims and values of Iain Duncan Smith's Centre for Social Justice, established four years earlier and which had vigorously and pro-actively sought to initiate new policies in this sphere in the intervening period.

### **The Conservative Party in Power: The role of the Welfare State, Social Policy and Social Justice from 2010**

Although the Conservative Party continued to struggle to achieve any sign of electoral progress in inner-city urban areas such as Glasgow East<sup>301</sup> where much of this social agenda was targeted at, the party did return to national power in May 2010, albeit as the senior partners of a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. David Cameron's apparently blossoming affinity with Duncan Smith on the broad welfare and social policy agenda and the pursuit of a revised vision of social justice came to fruition in May 2010 when he appointed him to his Cabinet in the role of Secretary of State for Work and Pensions<sup>302</sup>. This was a political elevation that marked Duncan Smith's return to frontline politics after his brutal ousting as Conservative Leader in 2003, and such a role offered him the opportunity to put his thorough policy findings, first-hand experiences and significant research while in opposition to the ultimate test while running a key government office. Some fellow Conservatives have subsequently praised his overall knowledge and approach in dealing with this challenging policy area, heralding him as *'the champion of early intervention'*<sup>303</sup> in such sensitive aspects of social policy (broadly covering the welfare state and associated policy areas). Such active interventionism has not necessarily been a trait of the Conservatives when dealing with such issues in the modern political era (post-1979), yet from an early stage of his leadership Cameron had *'recognise(d) the importance of softening the Party's approach towards those*

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<sup>301</sup> In the Glasgow East by-election of July 2008, the Conservatives received only 6.3% of the vote. See Glasgow City Council website:

[http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/en/YourCouncil/Elections\\_Voting/Election\\_Results/GlasgowEastByElection2008/GCByElectionResults.htm](http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/en/YourCouncil/Elections_Voting/Election_Results/GlasgowEastByElection2008/GCByElectionResults.htm)

<sup>302</sup> Amelia Gentleman, *'Iain Duncan Smith- contradictory social reformer with a "huge job"'*, The Guardian, 13<sup>th</sup> May 2010,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/global/2010/may/13/iain-duncan-smith-welfare-reform>

<sup>303</sup> Jonathan Aitken, *'Yes, prisons are full of people who shouldn't be there. But where would Ken Clarke put them?'*, Mail on Sunday, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2010,

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1297445/JONATHAN-AITKEN-Yes-prisons-people-shouldn-t-But-Ken-Clarke-them.html>



*experiencing poverty and disadvantage*<sup>304</sup>. This approach of Cameron and Duncan Smith in taking a reformist, less ideological and an ostensibly more ‘compassionate’ and open-minded attitude towards the welfare state has been described by some commentators and academics as a typical example of the re-emergence of Conservative pragmatism towards this policy area (as has been the case on various issues), as well as an acknowledgement of the need to utilise the power of a ‘strong state’ (as alluded to by Andrew Gamble<sup>305</sup>) in achieving the desired long-term political goal and removing obstacles to such an outcome. However, while the government’s position appeared to represent a move towards a more One Nation approach as opposed to the neo-liberalism of the New Right, Duncan Smith’s infusion of a moral need to improve the welfare of the poorer members of society could also be said to have had distinctly Thatcherite influences:

*‘Margaret Thatcher was not a reductionist in that all that mattered was a free-market economy. For her, a free market economy operated within a moral and cultural framework, but it was largely shaped by her devout Christianity, which is much under-rated’*<sup>306</sup>.

Although its moral and political compass could therefore be said to derive from a fusion of sources and influences, the post-2010 vision of Conservatism did not envisage that state's role would be as universal and comprehensive as was the case for the majority of the post-1945 era. As an alternative viewpoint, Conservative expectations demanded more devolved and diversified public service provision as part of a new strategy offering new solutions aimed at ensuring a better functioning social model and a version of civil society more appropriate and credible for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This outlook has been summarised by Robert Page as follows:

*‘Under David Cameron’s “Progressive” form of Conservatism the Party has adopted a more liberal approach towards the poor and those pursuing ‘non-traditional’*

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<sup>304</sup> Robert M. Page, University of Birmingham, ‘Clear Blue Water? The Conservative Party’s Approach to Social Policy Since 1945’, Paper to be presented at the Social Policy Association’s Annual Conference, University of Lincoln (5th-7th July 2010), p.11  
<http://www.social-policy.org.uk/lincoln/Page.pdf>

<sup>305</sup> See Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1988)

<sup>306</sup> David Willetts MP, interview with author, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012

*lifestyles. Whilst recognising that the state still has a role to play in funding and ..... providing welfare services, greater emphasis is now being placed on the part that individuals and communities can play in meeting their own welfare needs. This latest attempt to refashion the Conservative approach towards the welfare state is yet another illustration of the way in which the Party continues to adapt to changing economic and social circumstances*<sup>307</sup>.

This revised and contemporary form of Conservatism, which has been promoted by the Cameron leadership and his inner-circle, has been associated with the ambiguous and subjective term 'progressive'<sup>308</sup>, and it has sought to more explicitly emphasize the Conservative interpretation of this term. As part of this approach, Cameron has also embraced and promoted the value of society while continuing to stress the importance of individuals and community in achieving desired social outcomes and improved levels of social justice, rather than over-reliance on the hegemonic power of the state. Indeed, advocates of a less centralized and more devolved approach to the organization of the state criticized the years between 1997 and 2010 as being a missed opportunity for more radical and significant changes in the fundamental approach to national governance, as *'state growth without state reform has missed the opportunity to make structural changes'*<sup>309</sup>. This revised Conservative approach appears to partly align with the views of some academic commentators that following thirteen years of Labour rule *'the intervening years had seen the emergence of something of a new political consensus on welfare'*<sup>310</sup> which saw an increased degree of agreement about increased levels of state investment, fuelled by Labour's significant public spending increases between 1997 and 2010, although the extent of such 'consensus' is open to debate. However by the autumn years of New Labour's period in office, a new consensus was evolving among 'modernisers' in both major parties

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<sup>307</sup> Robert M. Page, University of Birmingham, *'Clear Blue Water? The Conservative Party's Approach to Social Policy Since 1945'*, Paper to be presented at the Social Policy Association's Annual Conference, University of Lincoln (5th-7th July 2010), p.14

<http://www.social-policy.org.uk/lincoln/Page.pdf>

<sup>308</sup> See Demos website: *'The progressive Conservatism Project: Conservative means can serve progressive ends'*, <http://www.demos.co.uk/projects/progressiveconservatism/>

<sup>309</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.2, p.37

<sup>310</sup> Hugh Bochel (ed.), *'Conservative approaches to social policy since 1997'*, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.1, p.1

that after a period of significant state growth, structural reform and a degree of ‘roll-back’ was now required. Indeed, the Conservative politicians of the 2010 administration have appeared to reject the approach of the majority of the New Labour era, which primarily focused on increased levels of micro-managed state investment from the centre, a viewpoint that was particularly re-formulated in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and the beginning of a deep economic recession. This has led to the emergence of more confident 1980s-style scepticism towards the pervasive role of the centralized state, maintaining a view that *‘does not regard public spending per se as a necessary vehicle for the amelioration of social ills’*<sup>311</sup>. However, such a bold vision for decentralized policy-making has again led critics to question how this approach equates to the practical achievement of enhanced levels of social justice, as despite promising greater efficiency and less bureaucracy, *‘the flipside of decentralization is that it means fewer guarantees..... about the scope and quality of provision available in each locality’*<sup>312</sup>.

Some of Duncan Smith’s initial experiences in devising policies for the CSJ and focusing on a new Conservative vision of social justice and associated policies had been formulated on the basis of his experiences within the inner-cities, notably in areas such as the deprived Easterhouse estate in Glasgow<sup>313</sup>. In taking such a path, he sought to re-ignite and rediscover the Conservative Party’s focus on this issue and revive the 19<sup>th</sup> century Disraelian ‘One Nation’ legacy of concern for poverty that had been somewhat eclipsed during the 1980s decade of individualistic ‘New Right’ hegemony. This approach also sought to challenge the perception (fuelled by various events and developments of the 1980s) that the Conservatives were indifferent to the plight of deprived communities, and that genuine attention and effort was required in order to address those members of society that were *‘dependent on the state..... (whose dependency) becomes a stigma and allows (their)*

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<sup>311</sup> Nick Ellison, ‘The Conservative Party and Public Expenditure’, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.2, p.58

<sup>312</sup> Louise Bamfield, ‘Beginning the Big Society in the Early Years’, cited in Jason Edwards (ed). *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012), p.173

<sup>313</sup> Iain Duncan Smith: ‘Labour has left the poor even more dependent on the state’, *The Independent*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2003,

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/iain-duncan-smith-labour-has-left-the-poor-even-more-dependent-on-the-state-580062.html>

Duncan Smith said after leaving Easterhouse in 2003: ‘When I left Easterhouse, I committed the Conservative Party to a new mission with these words: “A nation that leaves its vulnerable behind, diminishes its own future.”’

*demands to be disregarded (in political terms)*<sup>314</sup>. Both economic and social benefits could therefore be potentially produced by focusing on such a 'stigma' within modern society that had overlapped different governments as an issue needing to be addressed, namely based on the premise that *'the quality of your life and your morale is affected by how you do and are compared with other people'*<sup>315</sup>. Initiatives to challenge such long-term social dislocation and political alienation had indeed emerged within the context of the Labour government's struggles to reform the overall welfare system and reduce long-term 'dependency' on the state, as during thirteen years in power it has been claimed that *'they had done only slightly better than their Tory predecessor in liberating from welfare dependency the millions without good education or training'*<sup>316</sup>. Indeed according to critics of New Labour from the 'Big Society' wing of the Conservative Party like Jesse Norman, the successive administrations of Blair and Brown arguably failed to achieve the desired aspiration of achieving greater social justice, as well as failing to reform the welfare system and associated attempts to reduce dependency on the state by excessive welfare recipients.

This New Labour legacy prompted a Conservative rebuke that such statism *'actively undermined social justice'*<sup>317</sup>, along with academic observations that acknowledged that the New Labour era *'encouraged dependence on the state, while failing to meet the aim of reducing social inequality'*<sup>318</sup>. Within the context of such criticisms, a more efficient streamlining and de-centralisation of resources appeared to be the prime objectives of an incoming Conservative government, particularly given that the scope of the welfare system grew in both bureaucratic size and financial expenditure over thirteen years. Such an explicit failing after the party's most sustained ever spell in office was readily admitted by new party leader Ed Miliband in late 2010, when he claimed that Labour *"did not do enough when it was in power to reform the welfare system"*<sup>319</sup>, despite widely acknowledged increases in

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<sup>314</sup> Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1994), Ch.1, p.28

<sup>315</sup> David Willetts MP, interview with author, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012

<sup>316</sup> Andrew Rawnsley, *The End of the Party: The Rise and Fall of New Labour*, Ch.40, p.740, (Penguin, London, 2010)

<sup>317</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.2, p.43

<sup>318</sup> Jason Edwards, 'Freedom, Free Institutions and the Big Society', cited in Jason Edwards (ed). *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012), p.100

<sup>319</sup> BBC News website, *'Labour failed on welfare reform - Ed Miliband'*, 25<sup>th</sup> November 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11842711>

spending on the broader sphere of social policy. The size and scope of the inflated welfare structure that emerged under New Labour was exacerbated by an increasingly complex and bureaucratic benefits system due to the introduction of 'statist' and administration-heavy policies such as the proliferation of tax credits<sup>320</sup> and the broad extension of means-testing by Chancellor Gordon Brown (1997-2007). Welfare spending was subsequently said to have risen 40% in real terms (including for the effects of inflation) between 2000-10, but the Labour government's performance in terms of effective and financially efficient policy delivery has to be viewed in the context that welfare spending has arguably never really been kept under control by any government in the post-war years,<sup>321</sup> so it is perhaps inevitable that public spending in this area would have risen anyway in line with general post-war expenditure trends. However, critics of this policy from the Conservative political ranks have highlighted what they believe to be its excessive and wasteful cost, with Iain Duncan Smith claiming that:

*"In the years between 2003 and 2010, Labour spent a staggering £171 billion on tax credits, contributing to a 60% rise in the welfare bill. Far too much of that money was wasted, with fraud and error under Labour costing over £10 billion".<sup>322</sup>*

Such an apparently profligate performance by the Labour administration in this policy sphere since 1997 would form the framework and context for the broader socio-economic policy approach of the incoming coalition government from 2010 onwards, with prominent advocates of The Big Society arguing that many of Britain's social and economic '*problems (can be traced)..... to the long-term growth and centralization of the state*'<sup>323</sup>, alongside the associated costs that this trend has generated.

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<sup>320</sup> See Tax Credits:

<http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/MoneyTaxAndBenefits/TaxCredits/index.htm>

<sup>321</sup> BBC News website, '*Is welfare spending ever under control?*', 1<sup>st</sup> October 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-11443372>

<sup>322</sup> Iain Duncan Smith, '*Iain Duncan Smith: we've brought back fairness to welfare*', the Daily Telegraph, 30<sup>th</sup> December 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9772131/Iain-Duncan-Smith-weve-brought-back-fairness-to-welfare.html>

<sup>323</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.5, p.78

The significant and concerted efforts to revise the Conservative Party's attitudes within the area of social policy and its revised view of how the state effectively works and functions has led to political commentators observing that "Team Cameron" has '*adopted a more ameliorative approach towards poverty and social injustice than their Majorite or Thatcherite predecessors*'<sup>324</sup>, although critics would say that in the wake of the post-2010 austerity and retrenchment measures, practical policy has failed to match such rhetoric, focus and attention<sup>325</sup>. Despite this specific re-focusing however, at recent elections the Conservative Party has continued to struggle to win over a public that has appeared to be sceptical of the party's emphasis on developing policies that focus on tackling poverty, maintaining good standards of social welfare delivery<sup>326</sup>, yet while also seeking to reduce public spending, and an image remains among some key parts of the electorate that it remains the party for the better off members of society<sup>327</sup>. Although the concept of social justice remains hazy and is still open to interpretation within the contemporary political scene, in 2012 the Conservative-led government sought to clarify and crystallise its understanding and promotion of what it means in practice by releasing the document: '*Social Justice: transforming lives*'<sup>328</sup>, which offered an updated interpretation of this key concept as follows:

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<sup>324</sup> Nick Ellison, 'The Conservative Party and Public Expenditure', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.2, p.57-8

<sup>325</sup> Phillip Blond is particularly critical of the practical outcome of the Conservative Party's social policy agenda after 2010, stating:

*'The greatest disaster is austerity, because austerity empowered (George) Osborne ..... (to) produce what we've produced, which is nothing, and it is a terrible shame..... Cameron hasn't been able to marshal his intuition into concepts that triumph over other concepts, and we've had a mix and the old Toryism has won out'.*

Phillip Blond, Respublica think-tank, interview with author in Liverpool, 19th February 2013

<sup>326</sup> Lord Michael Ashcroft's analysis of the 2010 General Election concluded that the Conservatives were still viewed by many as '*representing (ing) the rich, not the poor*'.

Michael Ashcroft, *Minority Verdict: The Conservative Party, The Voters and The 2010 Election (2010)*, cited in the Daily Mail. 21<sup>st</sup> September 2010, '*Our Tory brand is still stained and those TV debates were a mistake*', <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1313831/Tory-brand-STILL-stained-TV-debates-mistake-says-Lord-Ashcroft.html>

<sup>327</sup> Lord Michael Ashcroft, '*"Suspicious Strivers" hold the key to Tory election prospects*', Lord Ashcroft Polls, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2012,

<http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2012/10/suspicious-strivers-hold-the-key-to-tory-election-prospects/>

<sup>328</sup> See HM Government, '*Social Justice: transforming lives*', Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions by Command of Her Majesty (March 2012), <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/social-justice-transforming-lives.pdf>

*‘Social Justice is about making society function better – providing the support and tools to help turn lives around..... the most effective solutions will often be designed and delivered at a local level..... (and it) is closely related to another Government priority: to increase social mobility’<sup>329</sup>.*

Alongside such a Conservative-inspired evolution and re-emphasis of the concept of social justice, the development of a body such as the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) and its links to Duncan Smith have led to the obvious inference among many political observers that it is politically and ideologically aligned with the Conservative Party, and it appeared to play a significant role in the re-moulding of party’s attitude towards welfare policy matters, with many observers and party reformers acknowledging that this has been an area somewhat neglected during the 1980s. Bolstered by his involvement with this recently-formed pressure group, Duncan Smith has subsequently argued in vigorous ‘One Nation’ language that the Conservatives have a duty to assist those in poverty and to promote their own specific notion of social justice in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context. However despite such perceptions of its political role and affiliation, the CSJ denies being explicitly connected in any way to the Conservative Party, stating that the organization is *‘unable to comment on the evolution of policy within the Conservative Party (as) an independent think tank’<sup>330</sup>*. This is despite the high-profile connections to Iain Duncan Smith and the fact that the Head of the CSJ, Philippa Stroud, stood unsuccessfully for the Conservative Party at the 2010 General Election and was subsequently appointed as an adviser to the Department of Work and Pensions, headed by Duncan Smith following the 2010 election result<sup>331</sup>. Nevertheless despite such connections, the CSJ has confidently claimed that it is a genuinely independent ‘think-tank’ that seeks to influence social policy of all parties *‘across the political spectrum and believe(s) that social justice should be a key plank of any party’s vision’<sup>332</sup>*, ultimately developing cross-party links within the burgeoning social justice and welfare policy agendas in the process.

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<sup>329</sup> HM Government, ‘Social Justice: transforming lives’, Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions by Command of Her Majesty (March 2012), Introduction, page 4

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/social-justice-transforming-lives.pdf>

<sup>330</sup> Charlotte Pickles, Policy Director, The Centre for Social Justice, E-mail to author, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2010

<sup>331</sup> Samira Shackle, ‘Philippa Stroud given special adviser role’, The New Statesman, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2010,

<http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2010/05/duncan-smith-win-seat-sutton>

<sup>332</sup> Charlotte Pickles, Policy Director, The Centre for Social Justice, E-mail to author, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2010



In therefore exploring the most efficient and optimum methods of delivering social policy, welfare provision and the provision of a distinct vision of the much debated concept of social justice in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century political environment, the CSJ has generally focused on addressing the role of government in the delivery of welfare provision, which in turn has led to demands for significant reforms of the welfare system and the encouragement and promotion of innovative and devolved policy practices that have primarily derived from community activities, voluntary groups, charities and other 'grassroots' social projects rather than the more traditional post-war funding streams from the monolithic state structure. In doing so, the CSJ has sought to promote the relatively novel notion, as endorsed by many Conservative modernisers, that the state does not necessarily have the answer to every socio-economic problem and that increased 'dependency' was ultimately the end result of such an exclusively 'statist' approach that has prevailed much of the post-war period, a criticism particularly adhered to the Labour Party after thirteen years in office until 2010:

*"Labour's policies have left the poor even more dependent on the state for their incomes and the kind of public services they receive. And that, in the end, will be Labour's legacy to the poor. Dependence, not independence"*<sup>333</sup>.

Such 'dependency' has, according to right-of-centre political critics, been re-enforced by the progressively higher levels of public spending associated with various social and welfare policies during Labour's thirteen year tenure in office from 1997 onwards. This viewpoint argues that the widely acknowledged additional public spending of this era created and funded additional levels of bureaucracy and complex means-tested welfare schemes (e.g. tax credits), that led to a further reliance on the benevolent mechanism of the state for many individuals in order for further financial benefits to be accessed. In the long-term this contributed (along with the post-2008 economic slump), towards a record deficit which Conservatives were increasingly critical of while in opposition and which they

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<sup>333</sup> Iain Duncan Smith: 'Labour has left the poor even more dependent on the state', The Independent, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2003, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/iain-duncan-smith-labour-has-left-the-poor-even-more-dependent-on-the-state-580062.html>



identified as a key priority to be tackled once in power after 2010, and which has subsequently been a pivotal and focused under-current to their social and welfare agenda since the advent of the financial crisis in mid-2008<sup>334</sup>. Labour's difficulties in addressing this policy area in the long-term while in office was despite the fact that a key aim of New Labour was to '*make work pay*', a sentiment that has generated broad political consensus and which has been heartily echoed by Cameron's Conservatives<sup>335</sup> in government from 2010. On the launch of the 'Universal Credits' policy in late 2010, where his ideas from opposition could be utilised in practical terms, Iain Duncan Smith alluded to the extreme economic conditions of the time as a specific reason to address this specific aspect of welfare provision, commenting that "*In prosperous times this dependency culture would be unsustainable but today it's a national crisis*".<sup>336</sup> On Labour's departure from office in 2010, it was clearly evident that spending on public services had steadily and clearly risen while the party was in power, particularly in contrast with the broadly declining rate of public spending as percentage of GDP between 1979 and 1997 (as evident in Table 1 below). Conservative critics would claim that such public spending increases after 1997 had not always gone on frontline services and that the issue of 'welfare dependency' had ultimately not been addressed:

**Table 1- Public Spending in UK as a Percentage of GDP (1975-2012)**

<u>Year</u>	<u>Public Spending as % of GDP</u>
1975-76	49.7
1976-77	48.6
1977-78	45.6

<sup>334</sup> See The Conservative Party, '*Get Britain Working*' (October 2009), [http://www.conservatives.com/News/News\\_stories/2009/10/Radical\\_welfare\\_reform\\_to\\_Get\\_Britain\\_Working.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2009/10/Radical_welfare_reform_to_Get_Britain_Working.aspx)

<sup>335</sup> BBC News website, '*Benefits system overhaul 'to make work pay'*', 11th November 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11728546>

<sup>336</sup> Iain Duncan Smith cited in BBC News website, '*Benefits system overhaul 'to make work pay'*', 11th November 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11728546>

1978-79	45.1
1979-80	44.6
1980-81	47.0
1981-82	47.7
1982-83	48.1
1983-84	47.8
1984-85	47.5
1985-86	45.0
1986-87	43.6
1987-88	41.6
1988-89	38.9
1989-90	39.2
1990-91	39.4
1991-92	41.9
1992-93	43.7
1993-94	43.0
1994-95	42.5
1995-96	41.8
1996-97	39.9
1997-98	38.2
1998-99	37.2
1999-2000	36.3
2000-01	34.5
2001-02	37.7
2002-03	38.5

2003-04	39.3
2004-04	40.5
2005-06	41.2
2006-07	40.9
2007-08	41.0
2008-09	44.5
2009-10	47.7
2010-11	46.8
2011-12	45.0
2012-13	43.1

Sources:

<http://www.ukpublicspending.co.uk>

DataBlog, 2013 Budget briefing, The Guardian, Monday 18<sup>th</sup> March 2013,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/apr/25/uk-public-spending-1963#data>

These accelerating fiscal figures and public expenditure trends of recent years could possibly justify the sentiments of contemporary frontline Conservative politicians such as Iain Duncan Smith, who have repeatedly and consistently lamented the progressive growth of ‘statism’ and its associated high levels of government spending. Such trends have been exacerbated by the bureaucratic implications of ‘targeted welfare’ which was a prominent feature of Gordon Brown’s welfare vision in particular, and which the Conservatives claimed provided further fuel to the overall culture of ‘dependency’ that remained in place under the sustained period of Labour government from 1997-2010. In adopting this approach they have sought to revive calls for greater ‘fiscal conservatism’ in an approach that rejects hegemonic state provision of core public services from the centre, and which seeks to deliver a more individualistic and self-reliant range of public services within an alternative version of social justice in the process, and this narrative has even been adopted by some more moderate reformist and chastened elements within the post-Brown Labour Party in

political opposition<sup>337</sup>. Such an emphasis on linking fiscal conservatism with the provision of social justice is arguably a difficult outcome to achieve (particularly within an era of significant austerity), and it does raise question marks as to the true motives of the Conservatives' renewed focus on welfare and social policy during the Cameron era, namely whether it is a genuinely new and more compassionate approach to this policy area, or is it merely a return of the Thatcherite policy of retrenchment and cutting back on the size and scope of the state's range of provision and support, moulded by moral and financial pressures while being cloaked and concealed by a less threatening rhetoric and language?<sup>338</sup>

In the context of Conservative attacks on the 'dependency culture' that was alleged to have been exacerbated during Labour's thirteen year period in power, it could be equally argued that 'dependency' was a prominent legacy of the Thatcher era during the 1980s and its historically high levels of sustained long-term unemployment and the significant financial cost of subsequent benefits. Indeed, such dependency could prove to be a burden on a similar scale for the Cameron-led coalition if unemployment continues to increase on his watch, rising to a 17 year high of 2.64 million in late 2011<sup>339</sup>. In such a context, the comments below, while directly alluding to the 1980s, could be seen as a damning indictment of the cross-party administration of power that encompassed the 31 years between 1979 and 2010:

*"..... instead of strengthening work incentives and reducing dependency, the government's policy of targeting created..... a dependency culture"<sup>340</sup>.*

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<sup>337</sup> See Policy Network, 'A Discussion Paper: In the black Labour: Why fiscal conservatism and social justice go hand-in-hand', 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2011,

<http://www.policy-network.net/publications/4101/-In-the-black-Labour>

<sup>338</sup> See Bruce Anderson and Robin Harris, 'Is Cameron a Thatcherite?', Standpoint magazine, October 2008,

<http://standpointmag.co.uk/is-david-cameron-a-thatcherite-october/?page=0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0>

<sup>339</sup> BBC News website, 'UK unemployment total reaches 17-year high', 12<sup>th</sup> October 2011,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-15271800>, see also:

BBC News website, 'UK unemployment increases to 2.64m', 14<sup>th</sup> December 2011,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-16175309>

<sup>340</sup> Ian Gilmour, *Dancing With Dogma: Britain Under Thatcherism*, (Simon & Schuster, London, 1992), Ch.6, p.163

The fact that greater ‘dependency’ could be seen as a consequence of Thatcher’s socio-economic approach was a somewhat ironic development given her broad hostility to ‘Welfarism’ that clearly developed during her time in power. She and her ‘New Right allies had consistently argued that the post-war years of consensus *‘had spawned a dependency culture’*<sup>341</sup> that *‘had been allowed to take hold..... (and) become both dysfunctional and costly’*<sup>342</sup> over a long-term period. Tackling this culture was therefore a fundamental political and socio-economic priority after 1979, yet it was not successfully dealt with during her eleven and a half years in power, with unemployment levels and consequently welfare recipients higher when she left office than when she came to power<sup>343</sup>, although public spending was reduced and streamlined (see Table 1). Thirteen years of Labour in power between 1997 and 2010 saw the country’s levels of public spending as a percentage of GDP steadily increase towards levels not witnessed since the mid-1970s (also see Table 1), a trend that would justify long-standing right-wing criticisms of the consistent profligate tendencies of Labour governments while in office. This in turn led to significant increases in the levels of expenditure on some key areas of welfare provision and social policy (as outlined in Tables 2 and 3 below), although whether increased public spending on key public services addressed society’s core socio-economic problems as well as the fundamental issue of social justice is not clear and it remains a matter of significant political debate that strikes at the heart of whether the state is always the best and most efficient mechanism of delivering key public services.

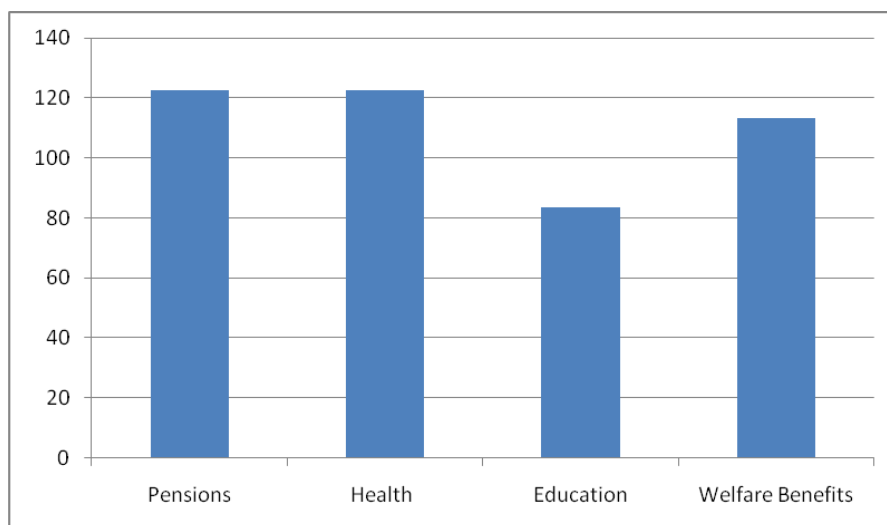
**Table 2- Government spending by billions (2011 estimates)**

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<sup>341</sup> Eric J. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism*, (Routledge, Oxon, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 2004), Ch.6, p.65

<sup>342</sup> Robert M. Page, ‘The Conservative Party and the Welfare State since 1945’, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.2, p.31

<sup>343</sup> Unemployment was approximately 1 million in 1979, while it was approximately 2.5 million in 1990. See BBC News website, ‘*The Thatcher years in statistics*’, 22nd November 2005 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in\\_depth/4447082.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/4447082.stm)



**Table 3- Government spending by key social policy areas as a percentage of GDP (2011 estimates)**

<b>Policy Area</b>	<b>Billions</b>	<b>% of GDP</b>
Pensions	122.6	8%
Health	122.4	8%
Education	83.6	5%
Welfare Benefits	113.1	7%
Overall GDP	1539	

Information Source for tables 1, 2 and 3:  
<http://www.ukpublicspending.co.uk>

### **The Influence of the Liberal Democrats on post-2010 social and welfare policies and the pursuit of social justice**

The above figures (Tables 1 and 2) indicate a considerable and ongoing financial outlay on key public services at a structural level, representing a massive challenge to any administration intent on both reforming the scope and streamlining the cost of government while at the same time seeking to create the necessary socio-economic conditions for

addressing inequality, long-term poverty and welfare dependency within a framework of a revised vision of social justice for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is the scenario facing the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition from 2010 onwards, a particularly ambitious agenda for a Conservative-led regime whose key political instincts and principles have historically (in modern times at least) been linked to retrenchment and the need to keep levels of public spending under control, rather than using the powers of the state to initiate improved public policy options as the proposed solution. It therefore remains to be seen as to whether this combination of factors can re-mould social justice as a concept that can be revised and re-moulded in line with the government's priorities and political agenda from 2010 onwards, and whether the political fusion of the Conservatives with a traditionally more interventionist political party has the potential to create new and original policy formulations in this sphere, with an associated morality and vigour to drive things forward.

Given this political attitude alongside the uncertain outcome of the 2010 General Election, it is important to analyse the extent to which the Conservative Party's coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats, are influencing the narrative regarding welfare reform and overall social policy, particularly as since the party's official inception in 1988 they have been broadly viewed as being more 'liberal' on social issues, more 'statist' in their approach to government intervention in the economy, and ultimately more profligate in terms of public spending than the Conservatives in recent times. However, the two parties appear to have moved closer together on such policy issues in recent years due to a combination of the parliamentary arithmetic from 2010 and the pragmatic reaction to it, coupled with a revised Conservative attitude towards social policy under the Cameron leadership from 2005, and fused with the ascendant influence of Nick Clegg's 'Orange Book'<sup>344</sup> (economic liberal) faction of Liberal Democrats from 2007 onwards. This political fusion of shared political priorities bolstered by a dual hostility to an unpopular outgoing Labour government consequently resulted in both parties reaching a broad agreement within the Coalition Agreement of May 2010<sup>345</sup> that emphasized the need for the '*greater use of private, social*

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<sup>344</sup> See Paul Marshall and David Laws (ed.), *The Orange Book: Reclaiming Liberalism*, (Profile Books, London, 2004)

<sup>345</sup> The Coalition Agreement of May 2010,  
<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/coalition-documents>

*enterprise and voluntary organizations in the provision of (public) services*<sup>346</sup>. This appeared to indicate a likelihood of a less 'statist' and more diverse approach to public service delivery within the context of a retrenchment agenda between 2010-15, alongside a cross-party willingness to pursue a more 'localist' political approach to decision-making<sup>347</sup>.

In such a context, since collaborating in office since May 2010, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats have broadly shared a greater focus and emphasis on the importance of developing a healthy and more localized civil society that is allowed to flourish away from the tentacles of a bureaucratic central state and its capacity to grow inexorably if given the opportunity to do so. This pursuit of a more vigorous, de-centralized model of civil society is therefore said to be a more effective means of promoting social justice according to its advocates, who broadly espouse the vision of the 'Big Society' and its less bureaucratic structure as an inspirational socio-political model. Such an idealized political model is ultimately more detached and less controlled by the centralizing tendencies of politicians who are often inclined to seek to control and manipulate the state's activities in their own partisan political interests, as well as being not over-reliant on the de-regulated markets as promoted by the neo-liberal outlook, a viewpoint primarily driven by arbitrary economic profit motives and which can be seen as undermining communitarianism and the wider social fabric. This burgeoning alternative approach to how government should most efficiently work, fused with a combination of specific political developments, philosophical fusion and electoral circumstances, has culminated in the Conservative Party's *'coalition with the Liberal Democrats, (and) the possibility of developing a somewhat different social policy agenda than the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s'*<sup>348</sup>. These earlier administrations had governed under very different political and social conditions, had larger parliamentary majorities and generally pursued a more ideological and less fluid approach to practical governance.

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<sup>346</sup> Hugh Bochel (ed.), 'Conservative approaches to social policy since 1997', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.1, p.20

<sup>347</sup> Allister Hayman, 'Clegg's battle for 'real localism'', *Local Government Chronicle*, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2011, <http://www.lgcplus.com/review/agenda/politics/cleggs-battle-for-real-localism/5024321.blog>

<sup>348</sup> Hugh Bochel, 'Cameron's Conservatism: influences, interpretations and implications', University of Lincoln (2010), p.1  
[http://www.social-policy.org.uk/lincoln/Bochel\\_H.pdf](http://www.social-policy.org.uk/lincoln/Bochel_H.pdf)



As part of the 2010 Coalition Agreement, Liberal Democrat MPs were expected to broadly support Iain Duncan Smith's first major policy initiative in the important and politically significant sphere of social and welfare policy, which materialised in his White Paper: *'Universal Credits: welfare that works'* (November 2010)<sup>349</sup>. This policy was notably influenced by the Centre for Social Justice and principally aimed at cutting costs and tackling the bureaucratic legacy of New Labour by streamlining and fusing a multitude of welfare benefits into a single payment. However it remains to be seen whether this will be successful<sup>350</sup> in either social, financial and indeed political terms, and critics have claimed that such a policy is *'practically unachievable'* in terms of delivery<sup>351</sup>, with fears that it is primarily inspired as a further means of reducing government expenditure and cutting the deficit, the apparent *raison d'être* for much of the coalition government's key activities during its first year in office (2010-11). In this context, critics of the Conservative Party's intentions in its post-2010 austerity measures claim that rather than offering a genuinely revived model for innovative social and welfare policy formulation, and by default an alternative vision of social justice, such cutbacks can instead appear to represent the Thatcherite tradition re-imposing itself on the party and re-asserting the Hayekian agenda of 'rolling back the state'. The dilemma for those members of the coalition government with a genuine and long-held interest in the policy area of welfare provision (such as Iain Duncan Smith), and who seek to address long-term social injustice and initiate radical and meaningful reforms to this policy area as opposed to adopting the blunt instrument of retrenchment, are potentially going to be thwarted within an atmosphere of cost-cutting and austerity. This also creates potentially serious and de-stabilising tensions for the coalition partners in power, particularly given the more interventionist and fiscally expansive tendencies of the 'social democrat' wing of the Liberal Democrats. However, the coalition government's dynamics on this issue have initially proved to be fairly robust, and

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<sup>349</sup> See Universal Credit: welfare that works:

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/universal-credit-full-document.pdf>

<sup>350</sup> Universal Credits, which round up a number of different benefits into one single benefits payment, comes into force in April 2013. See DWP website:

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/welfare-reform/universal-credit/>

<sup>351</sup> Frank Field, *'The universal credit programme is on course for disaster'*, Comment is Free, The Guardian, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/sep/10/universal-credit-benefits-disaster>

Cameron's determined focus to both decentralise the government structure and as a corollary, to save money within the sphere of welfare provision, does appear to have been broadly accepted by the junior coalition partners.<sup>352</sup>

However, the involvement and inclusion of the Liberal Democrats within the coalition government from 2010 onwards may restrict and curtail the more radical reformist tendencies of some Conservative politicians within this area of policy. Such a tense backdrop has the potential to seriously scupper any meaningful long-term welfare policy reforms, and it provides a potential breaking point in terms of both Iain Duncan Smith and Nick Clegg's loyalty to Cameron's government. Within this context of creating a balance between spending cutbacks and innovative policy-making in this area, it therefore remains to be seen whether it will be external Liberal Democrat pressures or internal Conservative pressures that will undermine the coalition's broader social policy agenda. In the early months of government and given the Liberal Democrats' ostensible discipline and loyalty to the May 2010 Agreement, it appeared that the early tensions at least were on an internal Conservative basis, with reported clashes over levels of spending between the incumbent at the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and George Osborne at the Treasury,<sup>353</sup> an indicator of the long-term challenges facing the incoming government of 2010 in relation to its attempts to deliver improved levels of social justice via the vigorous pursuit and determined implementation of a revised range of social and welfare policies. Overall therefore, the Conservative Party has encountered a range of problems in implementing its own distinct social justice agenda in practical sense since returning to office in 2010, with prominent obstacles being the need to tackle the national deficit, internal party conflict about its precise policy direction, challenges in distinguishing its policies from the New Labour legacy, the difficulties in putting theory-based policy initiatives into practice as well as the compromises required for coalition government. Such issues have been evident in a number of practical policy areas since the Conservatives came to power in 2010, which the thesis will now look at in more detail.

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<sup>352</sup> 'Nick Clegg defends radical benefits cuts', The Guardian, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/sep/16/clegg-defends-benefits-cuts>

<sup>353</sup> 'Now George Osborne and Iain Duncan-Smith clash over child benefit cuts', Daily Mail, 31st October 2010, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1325292/Now-George-Osborne-Iain-Duncan-Smith-clash-child-benefit-cuts.html>

## The Big Society

This chapter seeks to fuse theory with policy and identify and illustrate practical policy links that can be aligned and connected with the theoretical issues discussed within the earlier chapters of the thesis. It therefore seeks to explain and analyse the development and evolution of the concept of 'The Big Society' as a specific strand of David Cameron's attempts to create a framework and sense of direction for a practical social policy agenda that stems from theories of social justice and various ideological influences, as part of the process of seeking to modernise and revamp the Conservative Party's broader social agenda since he secured the party leadership at the end of 2005. Such an approach ultimately seeks to address and analyse the role of the state in providing key public services, and in turn assesses how realistic are the attempts by Cameron's government since 2010 to provide a comprehensive and stable range of public services and social policy initiatives within a smaller state model and a less bureaucratic structural framework. The socio-political term of 'The Big Society' has subsequently evolved into a high-profile and emblematic element of the wider approach of Conservative Party 'modernisers' to create a revised social policy agenda that particularly promotes a fresh vision of social justice for the right-of-centre tradition of British politics, which aspires to adhere to Conservative traditions yet also pragmatically accepts the significant socio-economic developments of the New Labour era from 1997 onwards. This policy approach was a culmination of Cameron's focus on regenerating interest in the broader sphere of social policy and 'society' since becoming party leader, and it came to evident fruition in the prolonged lead-up to the 2010 General Election, becoming a flagship Conservative policy proposal which promised to put:

*'more power in people's hands - a massive transfer of power from Whitehall to local communities. We want to see community empowerment, the opening up public services, and people encouraged and enabled to play a more active part in society.'*<sup>354</sup>

As opinion polls suggested an appetite for change among the dissatisfied electorate and the likelihood of a return to power for the Conservatives after thirteen years in the

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<sup>354</sup> See Conservative Party 2010 Manifesto, 'Big Society':  
[http://www.conservatives.com/Policy/Where\\_we\\_stand/Big\\_Society.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/Policy/Where_we_stand/Big_Society.aspx)

political wilderness<sup>355</sup>, Cameron's specific Conservative remedy to deal with his identification of the country's social and welfare-related problems (originating from various policy reviews), materialised in the form of a policy agenda that was clarified and condensed into three words- 'The Big Society'<sup>356</sup>. This succinct and well-marketed title was part of a broader attempt by Cameron to instil some communitarian-inspired vision and direction alongside an ethos of 'social justice' into his distinct brand of socially-orientated Conservatism. Within this approach, on a practical level Cameron sought to '*boost social action and community volunteering*'<sup>357</sup> as a legitimate and more flexible alternative to uniform state provision, while also instilling a moral streak of enhanced citizenship into social policy formulation in the process. However in its evolution in the period that has followed, the brevity of its title has created confusion and uncertainty, and for all of the Conservative claims that thirteen years of Labour rule resulted in 'big government' that failed to deliver a more 'socially just society', this social and moral vision has been somewhat blurred and misunderstood as both a concept and practical entity by significant sections of the media, the political classes and the wider general public.

### **The origins of The Big Society**

This specific political term had been developing and germinating from an early phase of David Cameron's leadership, with one prominent advocate of the Big Society stating in 2012 that '*David Cameron has been speaking about "Compassionate Conservatism", which is the governing philosophy behind the 'Big Society', for at least seven years*'<sup>358</sup>. However it was firmed up towards the end of 2009 at the Hugo Young Memorial Lecture, when the Conservative Leader sought to explicitly create a distinct and alternative model for a better functioning and more efficient civil society to replace the stuttering and 'broken one' his

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<sup>355</sup> Patrick Winter and Julian Glover, '*General election 2010: David Cameron eyes the prize*', The Guardian, Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> May 2010,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/may/05/general-election-2010-david-cameron>

<sup>356</sup> Nigel Morris, '*Tory manifesto: The case for the big society*', The Independent, Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> April 2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/tory-manifesto-the-case-for-the-big-society-1944058.html>

<sup>357</sup> Jane Merrick, '*The Big Society in crisis: Are the wheels coming off the PM's Big Idea?*', The Independent on Sunday, 15<sup>th</sup> May 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/the-big-society-in-crisis-are-the-wheels-coming-off-the-pms-big-idea-2284251.html>

<sup>358</sup> Jesse Norman, MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire, interview with author, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

policy reviews had identified. In doing so he emphasised the need for a bottom-up approach to social policy, involving *'greater citizen involvement and empowerment, and a bigger role for cooperatives, private service providers and voluntary groups'*<sup>359</sup>, all of which were key components of his vision of public policy provision that rejected the hegemonic and prominent role of the centralised and bureaucratic state that had been the dominant model and means of providing core public services for most of the post-war era. In arguing for a radical review of how poverty and inequality were to be tackled in the name of social justice, Cameron argued that:

*'.... the recent growth of the state has promoted not social solidarity but selfishness and individualism'*<sup>360</sup>.

In essence, Cameron was arguing for a revised 'rolling back' of the state from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, which would in turn create localised communities with greater autonomy and the power to initiate, influence and organise public activity including the provision of social and welfare policies. However he identified that the state was not to be eliminated entirely, but instead 're-imagined' and given a revised role in re-making society. Vocal supporters of the Big Society agenda argued that this policy sought to re-energise a *'strand of Conservatism that has existed for over 200 years'*<sup>361</sup> and which dated back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Whig tradition of Edmund Burke with its focus on individual civil liberties, a vibrant civil society and effective civic institutions, a strong sense of community and a limited state. Some modern Conservatives have lamented the loss of influence of Burke's Whig tradition within the modern Conservative Party dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, as such an outlook was essentially:

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<sup>359</sup> Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010), Ch.4, p.89

See also:

Speech, Rt Hon David Cameron: *'The Big Society, Hugo Young Memorial Lecture'*, Tuesday, November 10th 2009,

[http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/11/David\\_Cameron\\_The\\_Big\\_Society.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/11/David_Cameron_The_Big_Society.aspx)

<sup>360</sup> Rt. Hon David Cameron: *The Big Society, 'Hugo Young Memorial Lecture'*, Tuesday, November 10th 2009, cited in Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Introduction, p.1

<sup>361</sup> Jesse Norman, MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire, interview with author, 16th March 2012.

*‘optimistic about the ability of parties to make things better and this is something we lost when the Whig strand or the Liberal strand diverged from the Conservative strand’<sup>362</sup>.*

This burgeoning concept of an enhanced and more constructive role for political institutions released from the ostensible shackles of an overbearing centralised state, which in turn would create the appropriate conditions for a vibrant civil society and instilling a creative and moralistic individuality into local communities was the fundamental basis of this new Conservative agenda for social policy. In subsequent months following the initial public declaration of this agenda in late 2009, Cameron progressively formulated it as a dynamic and indeed ‘vigorous’ doctrine, which in its practical application would promote voluntarism and generate a wider collective social conscience as a means of rebuilding Britain’s wider cultural and social fabric:

*‘David Cameron’s pitch is that British society is broken, not just parts of it; and the underlying causes are cultural not economic. Taking his cue from the Social Justice Policy Group, the Conservative leader argues that British society is broken because of what he terms the decline in “responsibility” and “social virtue”. Civil society has become a lot less civil. By extending the powers and reach of the state, and taking responsibility away from individuals and communities, the Labour government has added to this social fracture’<sup>363</sup>.*

This emphasis on ‘social virtue’ and on the reinvigoration of a ‘civil society’ within the renewed and re-modelled socio-political structures of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has therefore been at the heart of the Conservative Party’s social agenda in the Cameron era. Such a revised Conservative social and welfare policy outlook was initially encouraged by the party hierarchy on an internal party basis while in opposition, evident in the ‘self-help’ social action projects that many Conservative politicians and parliamentary candidates were encouraged to develop in the build-up to the 2010 General Election (and to continue

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<sup>362</sup> David Willetts MP, interview with author, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012

<sup>363</sup> Stephen Driver, “‘Fixing our Broken Society’: David Cameron’s Post-Thatcherite Social Policy’, cited in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.6, p.88

beyond in some cases)<sup>364</sup>, although which were dismissed by political opponents as gimmicks. Such schemes were deliberately targeted at a grassroots level in order to provide model examples of how to respond to some genuine needs in terms of welfare provision from a more communitarian angle, while being notionally free from as much 'statist' bureaucratic control and regulation as is possible. In political opposition they were used by the Conservatives to illustrate the effective role of voluntarist, non-state bodies in delivering vital areas of public policy, and indeed in early 2007, Cameron was keen to *'indicate just how important the third sector and its workforce would be for a future Conservative government'*.<sup>365</sup> Such an approach also sought to instigate new social media and technology, an apparent influence of Cameron's Director of Strategy Steve Hilton, who enthused other modernising Conservatives with *'the creation of new forms of social action via advances in technology'*<sup>366</sup> (as evident in the clean-up operation after the 2011 summer riots when positive social action was instigated via Facebook in particular). The involvement of the voluntarist 'Third Sector'<sup>367</sup> was also identified from an early stage of this socio-political approach as a key component to be encouraged in such schemes and initiatives, again as a means of finding more efficient alternatives to uniform and monolithic state provision, and which in the process rejected the notion that the state has the answer to all of society's major socio-economic problems. While attacking the 'statist' agenda of Labour in office and also implicitly accepting an apparent neglect by his own party of social policy innovation in the past, the policy's overall ethos can therefore be concisely summarised as seeking to *'empower civil society using the failed approaches of left and right (as) they've clearly failed to broker a new solution'*<sup>368</sup>.

There does however remain a consistent public under-current of doubt and scepticism as to the viability of such an approach, with most contemporary opinion surveys indicating that the public ultimately retain greater faith in the power of the state to most effectively administer and deliver social and welfare policy. This has resulted in a somewhat

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<sup>364</sup> See Conservative Social Action Projects:

[http://www.conservatives.com/Get\\_involved/Social\\_Action/Get\\_Involved.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/Get_involved/Social_Action/Get_Involved.aspx)

<sup>365</sup> Hannah Fearn, *'True Blue?'*, Charity Times, Jan-Feb. 2007,

[http://www.charitytimes.com/pages/ct\\_features/jan-feb07/text\\_features/ct\\_jan-feb07\\_feature6\\_true\\_blue.htm](http://www.charitytimes.com/pages/ct_features/jan-feb07/text_features/ct_jan-feb07_feature6_true_blue.htm)

<sup>366</sup> David Willetts MP, interview with author, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012

<sup>367</sup> The 'Third Sector' broadly incorporates the charity, voluntary and fund-raising sectors within society.

<sup>368</sup> Phillip Blond, Respublica think-tank, interview with author, 19th February 2013

quixotic public mood, given that for all the inflated levels of public spending yet questionable service delivery under thirteen years of New Labour in power, there remains *'little public appetite for an expansion of private sector provision..... (and) deep divisions over the delivery of services by other organisations in the voluntary and third sector'*<sup>369</sup>. Nonetheless and despite such wider public doubts, the 'Big Society' social policy ethos has appeared on the political horizon to argue that by promoting and developing public service delivery schemes that fuse a reduced role for the state along with voluntary activity and greater community-level involvement, this in turn leads to a sense of greater social responsibility and civic virtue being instilled back into those who participate, along with better value for money for both the taxpayer and the government. With the overall ethos of this concept focusing on a reduced role for the state and an enhanced civic and even moral benefit for those involved in such community activities, Cameron's re-focused brand of Conservatism has therefore sought to offer a robust critique and coherent solution for Britain's *'broken society'*, with the promise of providing specific alternative policy approaches in the process. This is particularly in relation to the funding and overall strategic approach in delivering welfare provision in the UK, broadly recognised as a rising source of expense for all governments both now and in the future, and particularly so during a period of recession and austerity<sup>370</sup>. Alongside a greater emphasis on civic and community-based activity as a means of delivering a more distinct Conservative vision of social justice, such an approach is however not supposed to mark a return to the 'rugged individualism' promoted during the Thatcher era, but instead provide a more diverse, responsive, compassionate and flexible range of decentralised community-focused services and support structures for the vulnerable members of society to utilise for their benefit.

### **The Big Society during and after the 2010 General Election**

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<sup>369</sup> Andrew Defty, 'The Conservatives, social policy and public opinion, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.4, p.76

<sup>370</sup> Allegra Stratton and Julia Kollewe, *'Welfare bill soars as coalition counts cost of austerity drive'*, The Guardian, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/jan/02/welfare-bill-soars-coalition-austerity>



During the 2010 General Election campaign there was much dispute and political debate as to what the somewhat ambivalent term 'The Big Society' actually meant,<sup>371</sup> with one political commentator describing the term as having the power 'to send voters into a state of catatonic indifference'<sup>372</sup> with some Conservative candidates citing confusion about its meaning as an issue on the doorstep when canvassing for votes<sup>373</sup>. Critical voices cited it as a factor why Cameron failed to achieve an overall parliamentary majority despite Labour's failings in office<sup>374</sup>, accusing him of being unable to fundamentally connect with both his party and the wider public about the fundamental problems facing Britain, with the coalition with the Liberal Democrats as an eventual compromise settlement as a means of the Conservatives being restored to national power<sup>375</sup>. However, Cameron appeared undeterred and continued to promote the specific values and agenda of 'The Big Society' once he had been elevated to the position of Prime Minister, albeit within a coalition framework tinged with political expediency. Following the coalition's formation in May 2010, in one of his first high-profile press conferences with his Liberal Democrat Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, Cameron indicated how the concept was central to the party's coalition agreement and aims for coalition government<sup>376</sup>, with Clegg ostensibly endorsing this position in the process. The official Cabinet Office document that supported the policy affirmed the essence of this specific policy agenda as follows:

*'Our Conservative - Liberal Democrat Government has come together with a driving ambition: to put more power and opportunity into people's hands. We want to give*

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<sup>371</sup> See James Langdale, 'Election 2010: Assessing the campaign as end approaches', BBC News website, 5th May 2010:

*'(His) vision of a "big society" that would transform public services in this country..... was perhaps sprung on the electorate too late with many voters still struggling to understand what it might mean for them'.*

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/election\\_2010/8662442.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/election_2010/8662442.stm)

<sup>372</sup> Catherine Bennett, 'The "big society" is collapsing under its inherent absurdity', The Observer, Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> February 2011,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/06/david-cameron-big-society-coalition>

<sup>373</sup> Brian Wheeler, BBC News website, 'Big society: More than a soundbite?', 14th February 2011

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12163624>

<sup>374</sup> See Simon Heffer, 'That he can't connect with his party is worrying. That he can't connect with the public may be fatal', Daily Mail, 21<sup>st</sup> November 2011,

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2063387/That-connect-party-worrying-That-connect-public-fatal.html>

<sup>375</sup> BBC News website, 'Election 2010: First hung parliament in UK for decades', 7th May 2010,

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8667071.stm>

<sup>376</sup> BBC News website, 'Cameron and Clegg set out 'big society' policy ideas', 18<sup>th</sup> May 2010,

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/8688860.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8688860.stm)

*citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want. We want society – the families, networks, neighbourhoods and communities that form the fabric of so much of our everyday lives – to be bigger and stronger than ever before. Only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all’*<sup>377</sup>.

Despite such cross-party support for this localist and decentralised political agenda being proposed to run through the heart of the coalition government’s decision-making and policy process, debate over the precise meaning of the term has continued in the post-election aftermath. Some political observers subsequently claimed that despite Cameron’s buoyant rhetoric, during the first six months of his premiership from May 2010 onwards, this high-profile policy stuttered along and hovered on the brink of collapse<sup>378</sup>. In response, David Cameron has consistently and vigilantly argued that this policy agenda represented a re-moulding of a more compassionate form of Conservatism for the post-bureaucratic political era, essentially replacing Labour’s ‘big government’ model with the Conservatives’ ‘big society’<sup>379</sup> alternative. Within such a framework, Cameron has sought to utilise figures such as the social entrepreneur Baron Wei<sup>380</sup> and his focus on enhanced ‘social capital’ and innovative de-centralised social activity, alongside the academic Phillip Blond as prominent supporters of this socio-political agenda. They in turn have been dubbed Cameron’s ‘Big Society gurus’, broadly endorsing the coalition government’s critique of Labour’s state-heavy approach during its thirteen years in power from 1997, and bolstered by the emergence of bodies such as ‘The Big Society Network’<sup>381</sup>, have instead sought to generate

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<sup>377</sup> See ‘Building the Big Society’, Cabinet Office document, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2010:

[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/building-big-society\\_0.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/building-big-society_0.pdf)

<sup>378</sup> Peter Osborne, ‘Big Society RIP?’, The Daily Telegraph, 4th February 2011,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/8303188/Big-Society-RIP.html>

<sup>379</sup> Steve Hilton, ‘Our positive alternative to Labour’s big government is the big society’- Extracts from ‘The Steve Hilton Strategy Bulletins’, January 5<sup>th</sup> 2010,

<http://blogs.ft.com/westminster/2010/01/the-steve-hilton-strategy-bulletins/>

Steve Hilton was David Cameron’s Director of Strategy between 2006 and 2012.

<sup>380</sup> See Baron Wei’s ‘Big Society Network’:

<http://www.thebigsociety.co.uk/idea.html>

<sup>381</sup> ‘The Big Society Network’:

<http://www.thebigsociety.co.uk/>

greater social energy and community activity from a bottom-up rather than a top-down model of political action.

Blond has particularly been a key influence behind the ideas that have shaped the 'Big Society' blueprint, and as the founder of the tank-tank 'Respublica'<sup>382</sup> (from 2009), he has emerged as the architect of the 'Red Tory'<sup>383</sup> vision that espouses a more compassionate and less individualistic form of Conservatism, yet which rejects a powerful state within such a desired formula. It has been succinctly summarised as follows:

*'A commitment to the progressive merits of tradition and social conservatism and the need to build ethos-driven institutions, and a new Tory economics that distributed property, market access and educational excellence to all'.<sup>384</sup>*

An original Conservative-minded thinker, Blond has echoed the sentiments of David Willetts in arguing *'that the fundamental objective of Conservative politics should be a healthy civil society'*<sup>385</sup> with a more explicit emphasis on the importance of community and 'mutualism'<sup>386</sup>, yet featuring activities and services that are not the sole preserve of an all-powerful bureaucratic state. Blond's argument is ultimately both anti-statist yet focused on community cohesion, rejecting the bureaucracy of New Labour and the post-war model of welfare delivery, while also desiring *"red Tory" communitarianism, socially conservative but*

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<sup>382</sup> See:

<http://www.respublica.org.uk/>

<sup>383</sup> See Phillip Blond, *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It*, (Faber, London 2010)

<sup>384</sup> Phillip Blond, 'David Cameron has lost his chance to redefine the Tories', *Comment is Free*, The Guardian, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/03/cameron-one-nation-u-turn-tory-tragedy>

<sup>385</sup> See Kevin Hickson, 'The New Tories may be a puzzle but the pieces do make up a new kind of Britain', *Parliamentary Brief Online*, 30<sup>th</sup> March 2010,

<http://www.parliamentarybrief.com/2010/03/the-new-tories-may-be-a-puzzle-but-the-pieces>

<sup>386</sup> Blond describes 'mutualism' as:

*'Mutualism represents perhaps the most flexible and beneficial way of transforming our public services..... based on principles of reciprocity, equity and fairness. It is a system that allows for equity (what you put in and therefore can take out), be that in terms of finance or services, to be realised in any number of ways. To achieve the positive transformation of our public services, we need to find new models of mutualism fit for the 21st century..... creating innovative ways of bringing together public and private capital, enabling private companies to make a fair return from their capital investments, while at the same time giving all those involved a stake or return of some sort'.*

Cited in Philip Blond and Jane Dudman, 'Common Purpose', *Ethos Journal*, (October 2011),

<http://www.ethosjournal.com/home/item/265-common-purpose>

*sceptical of neoliberal economics*<sup>387</sup>. Such a viewpoint rejects both the dominance of the state as an agent of delivering standardisation, which Blond describes as the *'the great destroyer of wealth and opportunity'*<sup>388</sup>, while also dismissing the New Right's ideological prescription of an inflated status and supremacy for the prevailing role of the markets in influencing policy-making. Blond has repeatedly offered a scathing critique of the modern New Right agenda as having produced *'an argument for free markets but a failure to deliver them'*<sup>389</sup>, or provide a fairer distribution of wealth and resources. He instead prescribes a paternalistic and community-led approach to shaping social policy, and he ultimately views the emergence of this policy approach as:

*'A response to what I think is an historically unprecedented situation, which is the destruction of both the standard left and standard right positions. We're now in a situation where both are busted flushes'*<sup>390</sup>.

This vision is ultimately aligned with enhanced levels of government efficiency alongside a more streamlined state, which combined with a more diverse and innovative range of service providers aims to deliver wider social policy improvements and stake-holding opportunities for ordinary citizens:

*'we have followed the standard model for, goodness knows, some sixty years that the state can deliver all, and the state has failed. During the time under New Labour we pumped more money into the state than ever before and actually all the indices fell – social mobility fell, the ability of people to transform their lives dropped, poverty increased. What the Big Society is saying is that the state hasn't been working, how can we make it work? It is a pro-poor, pro-society agenda'*<sup>391</sup>.

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<sup>387</sup> Phillip Blond, *'Rise of the red Tories'*, Prospect magazine, 28th February 2009, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2009/02/riseoftheredtories/>

<sup>388</sup> Phillip Blond, Respublica think-tank, interview with author in Liverpool, 19th February 2013

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

<sup>391</sup> Dermot Murnaghan debates the Big Society with Phillip Blond (former Cameron advisor), Rev Peter Smith Archbishop of Southwark and Sir Stephen Bubb, ACEVO, Sky News, 13th February 2011, <http://skynewstranscripts.co.uk/transcript.asp?id=946>

In further developing this argument, Cameron has proclaimed that this new political approach would represent a *"big advance for people power"*, and that *"my great passion is building the big society..... (to) turn government completely on its head"*<sup>392</sup>, due to the creation of a less 'statist' model of government as a consequence. This line of argument has been described as another leading proponent of the Big Society as a rejection of *'a diet of top-down prescription and centralised government'*<sup>393</sup>. Blond has gone on to argue under the cloak of his think-tank that the role of collective and 'community' action should indeed be an important feature of modern and re-branded Conservatism, and this focus has appeared to represent an apparent rejection of the Thatcherite 'New Right' individualist analysis of society. In claiming that the policy is 'pro-poor', this appears to contradict broad perceptions of post-1979 Conservative policies that ostensibly seemed to promote a free-market model of government featuring a 'rolled-back' state and low taxation that created a socio-political scenario which broadly appeared to favour the better off members of society<sup>394</sup>. This 21<sup>st</sup> century approach on the back of three successive general election defeats seeks to broaden the party's electoral appeal while maintaining a general Conservative suspicion as to whether the state has the definitive answer to all of society's socio-political problems, broadly adhering to the right-of-centre viewpoint which maintains an *'embedded scepticism about the benefits of public expenditure'*<sup>395</sup>. Nevertheless, the viewpoint of Blond explicitly argues that both the neo-liberal 'market-state' of the 'New Right' under Thatcher's guidance and the more socially liberal and interventionist tendencies of 'New Labour' under the Blair-Brown axis, have ultimately failed in addressing the inherent socio-economic needs and demands of the wider population:

*'Under the auspices of both the state and the market, a vast body of disenfranchised and disengaged citizens has been constituted..... stripped of their culture by the Left*

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<sup>392</sup> David Cameron, speech in Liverpool, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2010, cited on BBC News website, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2010, *'David Cameron launches Tories' 'big society' plan'*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-10680062>

<sup>393</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Introduction, p.3

<sup>394</sup> See Hugo Young, *One of Us*, (Pan Macmillan, London, 1989), p.607: *'(During the Thatcher government) the average rise of anyone in the top 10 per cent of earners was 47 percent (1979-90); for a man in the lowest 10 per cent it was 2.9 per cent'*.

<sup>395</sup> Nick Ellison, 'The Conservative Party and Public Expenditure', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.2, p.41

*and their capital by the Right, and in such nakedness they enter the trading floor of life with only their labour to sell. Proletarianised and segregated, the individuals created by the market-state settlement can never really form a genuine society: lack(ing) the social capital to create such an association and the economic basis to sustain it.”<sup>396</sup>*

From an academic perspective therefore, Blond has sought to consolidate and bolster Cameron’s attempts to shape and influence a Conservative political agenda with an ideological anchor and an enhanced social policy focus and emphasis, promoting a socio-political model that values the importance of society and community, yet one which is not exclusively dominated by the power of the state, and which actively seeks its withdrawal from some aspects of everyday life:

*‘The Big Society, let me put it at its most simple, is helping people to help each other so we can help our neighbours, our communities and renew the places where we live and rebuild our society..... the point is the Big Society is saying something is wrong with the traditional approaches, we pump millions into the state and we still have situations like Baby P who met some 50-60 state officials, who die..... what’s happened is we’ve taken away power and opportunity from more and more people and put it in the centre, it is about putting ordinary people in the driving seat’<sup>397</sup>.*

### **Public Response to the Big Society and an Austerity Agenda**

In terms of the Conservative Party at its grassroots level, one activist has appeared to acknowledge the appeal of this concept in re-branding and re-marketing some core Conservative values, arguing that this policy agenda is ‘*extremely complementary to Conservative Party traditions of the “small state”, “localism” and the “empowerment of the*

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<sup>396</sup> Phillip Blond, Extract from *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix it*, (Faber, London, 2010), cited in Conservative Home website, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2010, <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thinktankcentral/2010/03/thatcher-failed-says-selfstyled-red-tory-phillip-blond-as-he-launches-twenty-policy-ideas.html>

<sup>397</sup> Dermot Murnaghan debates the Big Society with Phillip Blond (former Cameron advisor), Rev Peter Smith Archbishop of Southwark and Sir Stephen Bubb, ACEVO, Sky News, 13th February 2011, <http://skynewstranscripts.co.uk/transcript.asp?id=946>

*individual*”<sup>398</sup>. However, despite claims of the ‘Big Society’ having an ideological coherence and consistency with the Conservative Party’s overall ‘localism’ agenda<sup>399</sup> of recent years, parts of the media, the political commentariat and indeed the wider general public have continued to be increasingly frustrated and confused at the perceived ‘fuzziness’ of what it actually means in practice, requiring further detail in the process. In this context, approximately a year after Cameron became Prime Minister, two opinion polls suggested that *‘the public are increasingly confused by the concept’*<sup>400</sup>. One recurring public concern has been the broad belief, as expressed in opinion polls and British Social Attitudes surveys, that despite a steady short-term growth in public concern about the levels of government spending as the New Labour era progressed, long-term opinion trends suggest that certain key social and welfare policies continue to be viewed as the fundamental responsibility of the state:

*‘..... it is apparent that a large proportion of the public nevertheless feel that welfare provision is mainly the responsibility of the government. This may call into question the level of likely support for the Conservative idea of the “Big Society”.* <sup>401</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> Carl Cross, Chairman of Merseyside Conservative Party (2009-12), E-mail questionnaire to author, 4<sup>th</sup> March 2011

<sup>399</sup> Conservative Party website, *‘Pickles unveils Localism Bill’*, Monday 13th December 2010:

[http://www.conservatives.com/News/News\\_stories/2010/12/Pickles\\_unveils\\_Localism\\_Bill.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2010/12/Pickles_unveils_Localism_Bill.aspx)

See also *‘Control Shift: Returning Power to Local Communities’*, Policy Green paper No.9, Tuesday February 17<sup>th</sup> 2009, see:

[http://www.conservatives.com/News/News\\_stories/2009/02/Its\\_time\\_to\\_transfer\\_power\\_from\\_the\\_central\\_state\\_to\\_local\\_people.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2009/02/Its_time_to_transfer_power_from_the_central_state_to_local_people.aspx)

<sup>400</sup> Jane Merrick, *‘The Big Society in crisis: Are the wheels coming off the PM’s Big Idea?’*, The Independent on Sunday, 15<sup>th</sup> May 2011

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/the-big-society-in-crisis-are-the-wheels-coming-off-the-pms-big-idea-2284251.html>

In the ComRes poll of 15<sup>th</sup> May 2011, *‘40% of respondents did not know what it meant’*, a 10% increase since February 2011, see:

<http://www.comres.co.uk/page1902473831.aspx>

<sup>401</sup> Andrew Defty, *‘The Conservatives, social policy and public opinion*, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.4, pp.67-8

Defty’s research also suggests that:

*‘Data from Ipsos MORI suggests that under Labour more than two thirds of the public believed that public services should be run by the government or local authorities rather than private companies, and that there has been a slight increase in support for state provision since 2000’.*

A 2004 British Social Attitudes Survey found that while 55% of those asked thought that private companies could run public services more cost effectively, 73% believed the government would be better to deliver such services to those that needed them most, A. Defty cited in H. Bochel (ed.), (2011), Ch.4, p.68



Along with a sceptical public, even ‘Big Society’ prophets and ideologues such as David Willetts have appeared to acknowledge that this overall policy approach faces practical problems in terms of implementation, and risks for the Conservative Party’s overall image. This viewpoint argues that the emphasis of The Big Society on community-led voluntarism lacks some practical realities in terms of policy delivery and implementation, and in the process generates a negative reaction towards the Conservatives in the context of allowing people to *‘think that Conservatives hate the state’*<sup>402</sup>, and one commentator has subsequently observed that there doesn’t appear to be *‘any coherent means by which efforts to mend the broken society can be co-ordinated’*<sup>403</sup>. A key cross-party report published exactly one year after the launch of ‘The Big Society’<sup>404</sup> subsequently claimed that the government *‘has failed to properly explain it..... amid fears it will be concentrated in wealthy suburbs and leave the poorest parts of the country behind’*<sup>405</sup>. Such apparent failings of communication and delivery have exposed the Cameron-led government’s inability to effectively transmit the primary focus of the government’s message in relation to this high-profile policy, a particularly notable failure in this instance given that it was the poorer parts of society that ‘The Big Society’ was primarily supposed to focus on, and also that Cameron highlighted it as one of his government’s most potentially enduring legacies. Amidst such ongoing wider public confusion, Cameron was forced to promote what was claimed to be the fourth relaunch of this flagship policy in May 2011<sup>406</sup>, again emphasising the need for greater voluntarism and charitable activity stemming from community-based activity rather than the unerring control of the hegemonic state, and in doing so offering a revised version of modern Conservatism that represented a fresh image and a break from the past in

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<sup>402</sup> David Willetts MP, interview with author, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012

<sup>403</sup> Nick Ellison, ‘The Conservative Party and Public Expenditure’, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.2, p.58

<sup>404</sup> See ‘*Powerful People, Responsible Society*’, The report of the Commission on Big Society (16<sup>th</sup> May 2011), <http://www.acevo.org.uk/page.aspx?pid=191&nccsm=21&nccscid=28&nccsct=Free+Downloads&nccspID=1077>

A YouGov poll carried out for the Commission found that 78% of the public believed that the government had failed to effectively articulate what *‘The Big Society’* meant.

<sup>405</sup> Polly Curtis, ‘*Government urged to take stronger lead on ‘big society’*’, The Guardian, 16<sup>th</sup> May 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/may/16/government-urged-stronger-lead-big-society>

<sup>406</sup> BBC News website, ‘*David Cameron aims to boost Big Society*’, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-13496397>

See also:

Samira Shackleton, ‘*Fourth time lucky for David Cameron’s “big society”?*’, ‘The Staggers’, The New Statesman, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2011, <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/05/society-idea-cameron-today>



retorical emphasis at least, being somewhat detached from both the New Right's individualist neo-liberal focus but also resistant to the perceived 'statist' and bureaucratic tendencies of New Labour in government. In re-affirming his support for this policy, Cameron referred to his ongoing faith in this policy and described it as his 'passion' and 'mission'<sup>407</sup> in politics.

However, further criticism of 'The Big Society' policy emerged in autumn 2011, when the House of Commons Public Administration Committee re-affirmed such practical concerns, declaring that the proposed devolution and decentralisation of power would not work without radical and significant structural reforms to the civil service in order to meet the demands of the new policy.<sup>408</sup> Further critical comments came from the same committee at the end of 2011, when it declared that the public and voluntary sectors remain confused about the Big Society's implications, with the Chair of the Committee Bernard Jenkin adding that the government's ongoing focus on greater localism and devolution within political decision-making would take a period of time to impact on broader public perceptions of this policy:

*'This was never going to happen overnight. To make a change of this magnitude successfully will take a generation. It represents a whole new way of government. However, so far, the government has not been clear enough about what the Big Society means in practical terms'*<sup>409</sup>.

Such concerns followed claims from both political opponents and erstwhile allies that government spending cuts were further hampering the implementation of this policy ethos, and that indeed the whole political approach was in fact a smokescreen to mask the significant public spending cuts being pursued from May 2010 onwards. This was partially

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<sup>407</sup> The Daily Telegraph, 'David Cameron: deficit reduction is my duty, Big Society my passion', 14<sup>th</sup> February 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/8322788/David-Cameron-deficit-reduction-is-my-duty-Big-Society-my-passion.html>

<sup>408</sup> BBC News website, 'Big Society doomed unless civil servants change – MPs', 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-15019689>

<sup>409</sup> Bernard Jenkin MP cited in 'Big Society is being hampered by lack of clarity – MPs', BBC News website, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-16168695>

acknowledged by a key instigator of the policy, Philip Blond, who in early 2011 stated that *'the cuts as administered I think risk damaging the infrastructure of the Big Society'*<sup>410</sup>, and who later in the year claimed that the policy was *'failing'* and being undermined by the depth and scale of the government's retrenchment agenda, amidst rumours of a cooling of his level of influence over the Prime Minister<sup>411</sup>. Similar critical conclusions were reached by an independent analysis of the policy a year later (mid-2012), with the tank-tank Civil Exchange concluding that the flagship policy had been *'undermined by cuts and distrust'*<sup>412</sup> in the eyes of the wider public. Cameron's response to such claims that public spending cuts are undermining the Big Society ethos was to launch the Big Society bank<sup>413</sup> in the spring of 2012 as a public-private source of funding that will seek to provide *'start-up capital for social enterprises'*<sup>414</sup>. Such a pro-active move, which appears to re-affirm a key role for the state in this revised model of society, has formed part of a vigilant response by the Prime Minister in response to the clamouring viewpoint that retrenchment has allegedly undermined the whole concept of the Big Society as the government's spending cuts have impacted from 2010-11 onwards in particular.

This outlook has been particularly voiced by a prominent figure from the charity sector, Dame Elisabeth Hoodless, who claimed that the coalition government's slashing of public expenditure in the ostensible name of deficit-reduction and to re-invigorate

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<sup>410</sup> Dermot Murnaghan debates the Big Society with Phillip Blond (former Cameron advisor), Rev Peter Smith Archbishop of Southwark and Sir Stephen Bubb, ACEVO, Sky News, 13th February 2011, <http://skynewstranscripts.co.uk/transcript.asp?id=946>

<sup>411</sup> Toby Helm, *'David Cameron's guru attacks the failings of the "big society"'*, The Guardian, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/jun/18/david-cameron-guru-big-society>

See also:

Phillip Blond, *'David Cameron has lost his chance to redefine the Tories'*, Comment is Free, The Guardian, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/03/cameron-one-nation-u-turn-tory-tragedy>

<sup>412</sup> Patrick Butler, *'Cameron's 'big society' undermined by cuts and distrust, says study'*, The Guardian, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/may/07/david-cameron-big-society-cuts-distrust>

See also:

Civil Exchange, *'The Big Society Audit 2012'* (May 2012),

<http://www.civilexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/THE-BIG-SOCIETY-AUDIT-2012finalwebversion.pdf>

<sup>413</sup> See *'Big Society Capital'*:

<http://www.bigsocietycapital.com/>

<sup>414</sup> Sarah Neville and Jonathan Moules, *'"Big society bank" to start providing capital'*, Financial Times, April 4<sup>th</sup> 2012,

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/51466676-7d8f-11e1-bfa5-00144feab49a.html#axzz1rANxkGjJ>

voluntarism and reduced reliance on the state would in fact paradoxically erode the very principles of voluntarism that the new devolved, communitarian political agenda sought to encourage, claiming that “*there are other ways of saving money without destroying the volunteer army.*”<sup>415</sup> This allegation followed reports that the charitable sector, the ‘*supposed vanguard of the Big Society*’<sup>416</sup>, and central to the delivery of its agenda, was facing massive cuts in government funding and subsidies as part of the coalition government’s determined attempts to drive down the national deficit from mid-2010 onwards<sup>417</sup>, with an estimated 7,000 such bodies having to close during 2011-12<sup>418</sup>. It has also been argued that many people are too busy either maintaining or seeking employment during a difficult economic period to have the time or commitment to engage in the sort of community-based voluntarism envisaged by the Big Society approach to public policy<sup>419</sup>, as well as having less of their own money to donate to charity due to the more severe economic climate. Some critics and bodies such as Volunteering England have even claimed that charities are being exploited and the unemployed are being targeted in the name of work experience within a Big Society narrative, both being expected to provide their services free of charge as a means of reducing the costs of private work programme providers<sup>420</sup>. Such developments strike at the heart of the argument inherent to the Big Society agenda that a smaller state encourages greater levels of citizen engagement and charitable activity. Optimists however have continued to argue that there are innovative means of getting round such challenging socio-economic realities, as outlined below:

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<sup>415</sup> BBC News website, ‘*Cuts “destroying big society” concept, says CSV head*’, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12378974>

<sup>416</sup> Steve Corbett and Alan Walker, ‘The Big Society: Back to the Future’, *The Political Quarterly*, Volume 3, Issue 3, (July-September 2012), p.490

<sup>417</sup> Randeep Ramesh, ‘*Charities fight for survival as funding slashed across country*’, *The Guardian*, Tuesday 2nd August 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/aug/02/charities-fight-survival-funds-slashed>

<sup>418</sup> See Daily Mail: ‘*It’s all talk and no action’: David Cameron’s Big Society plans blasted after 7,000 charities were forced to close last year*’, 17th August 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2189666/David-Camerons-Big-Society-plans-blasted-7-000-charities-forced-close-year.html#ixzz258mL6Jcj>

<sup>419</sup> Emma Barnett, Digital Media Editor, *Daily Telegraph*, ‘*How will the ‘Big Society’ work if no one has time to volunteer?*’, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2011, <http://www.mydaily.co.uk/2011/05/19/how-will-the-big-society-work-if-no-one-has-time-to-volunteer>

<sup>420</sup> Patrick Butler’s Cuts Blog, ‘*The Work Programme’s ‘big society’ logic: get charities to do it for free*’, *The Guardian*, Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> November 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/patrick-butler-cuts-blog/2011/nov/10/work-programme-charities-working-for-free>

Also see ‘Volunteering England’: <http://www.volunteering.org.uk/>

*'When times are tough hardly anything is protected, and amongst the victims of any recession includes voluntary giving and voluntary activity and we have to be realistic about that. However where the likes of Steve Hilton has brought David Cameron's Conservatism is ..... using social media for new forms of community action and volunteering'*<sup>421</sup>.

Whether such utilisation of new technology fills the emerging charitable void remains to be seen, given such an unconvinced wider reaction towards the policy amidst an atmosphere of public spending cuts. The government has been regularly forced on the offensive in promoting this overarching policy direction, with further attempts to clarify the precise sentiments of the 'Big Society' made by Cabinet members on a regular basis. For example Baroness Warsi, then Chairman of the Conservative Party, sought to affirm its meaning in a fairly concise manner in the House of Lords in February 2011:

*"The big society is defined by many in this House as being what most of them have done for most of their lives. It is a volunteering, social action, philanthropic approach to life, but it is also about the opening up of public services to local control and devolution of power."*<sup>422</sup>

However, the policy's apparent inability to capture the wider public and indeed Conservative imagination could perhaps be seen in that it failed to make the formal agenda of the 2011 Conservative Party Conference<sup>423</sup>, while there was only one fairly limited mention of it during David Cameron's conference speech in 2012, when he aligned it with the voluntarist spirit of the 2012 London Olympics workforce:

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<sup>421</sup> David Willetts MP, interview with author, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012

<sup>422</sup> Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, House of Lords (Hansard), 9<sup>th</sup> February 2011, Column 221, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldhansrd/text/110209-0001.htm#11020963000771>

<sup>423</sup> Patrick Hennessy, 'No place for Big Society at Conservative conference', Daily Telegraph, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/8754793/No-place-for-Big-Society-at-Conservative-conference.html>

*“And those Games-Makers. You know, I’ve spent three years trying to explain the Big Society.....they did it beautifully in just three weeks”.*<sup>424</sup>

David Cameron did however seek to further re-ignite its relevance by linking the ‘Big Society’ as a key driver and narrative behind the New Year’s honours list of 2011/12,<sup>425</sup> suggesting that he was not willing to totally abandon the concept despite the various setbacks affecting its overall evolution and progress. He was simultaneously supported in retaining some faith in this policy agenda by a prominent commentator who has argued that the policy, despite being unfavourably likened to Tony Blair’s vague and uninspiring ‘Third Way’, still had the potential to act as the ‘pro-active’ driving force, the moral compass and the sense of political coherence for a coherent domestic policy agenda that Cameron has so far struggled to articulate<sup>426</sup>.

### **Reaction to the ‘Big Society’ from left and right**

There are various left-of-centre figures who have been critical of this new Conservative-led agenda and who have been sceptical of claims that the policy does not have right-wing or ‘neo-liberal’ implications. This viewpoint is also fearful of how the Big Society’s emphasis and reliance on voluntarism and localised schemes could potentially affect the overall provision of key public services. In its rejection of the hegemony of the state as a public service provider, this has raised fears that the policy could initiate a return to the mentality of the Victorian era when state welfare provision, the effective regulation of standards and the assurance of ‘safety nets’ for recipients of key social policies were limited, and both public and charitable welfare provision was far more arbitrary and less uniform and

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<sup>424</sup> The Independent, ‘Conservative Party Conference 2012 in Birmingham: Full transcript of David Cameron’s speech’, 10th October 2012:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/conservative-party-conference-2012-in-birmingham-full-transcript-of-david-camersons-speech-8205536.html>

<sup>425</sup> Stephen Bates, ‘New Year honours list reflects my aims for “big society”, says David Cameron’, The Guardian, 31<sup>st</sup> December 2011

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/dec/31/new-year-honours-david-cameron>

<sup>426</sup> Anthony Seldon, ‘The big society must be grounded in goodness’, Guardian Comment Network, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jan/03/big-society-goodness-government-morality>

See also Anthony Seldon, ‘The Politics of Optimism’, Policy Exchange research note, January 2012,

[http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/pdfs/The\\_Politics\\_of\\_Optimism\\_-\\_Jan\\_12.pdf](http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/pdfs/The_Politics_of_Optimism_-_Jan_12.pdf)

universal in nature<sup>427</sup>. In practice, this perspective fears that such an approach would mark a dismantling rather than a restructuring of the post-war welfare state. Such a voluntarist emphasis has therefore been lambasted by many political and academic figures on the centre-left who have claimed that the term 'Big Society' is merely a vague euphemism for the justification of savage public spending cuts and a massive shrinking of the state's size and its egalitarian scope and remit, regardless of David Cameron's soothing vocabulary and renewed focus on the concept of 'society'<sup>428</sup>. Indeed, other leftist commentators have further warned of the dangers of this approach, arguing that the Cameron regime is threatening to bypass the goals of the Thatcher era, claiming that '*Where she privatized state-run industries, the Cameron government would dismantle the state itself*' and that Cameron '*retains the misleading aura of a pragmatist, disguising the fervour of his anti-state dogma*'<sup>429</sup>.

However despite such media, academic and broader public scepticism about the nature of the concept, in the wake of the 2010 General Election result Labour politicians have been forced to adapt and respond to the 'Big Society' political agenda and its associated vocabulary as outlined by Cameron<sup>430</sup>, with concerted efforts being made to mould rival and distinct political messages in order to both contribute to and challenge the narrative in relation to social justice and the welfare state, but framed with a left-of-centre

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<sup>427</sup> Ed Miliband, Labour Leader from 2010, described the approach of the "big society" as '*a return to Victorian philanthropy*', cited in:

Nicholas Watt, '*David Cameron reveals 'big society' vision – and denies it is just cost cutting*', The Guardian, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2010,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/jul/19/david-cameron-big-society-launch>

<sup>428</sup> See Roy Hattersley and Kevin Hickson, 'In Praise of Social Democracy', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol.83, Issue 1, (January-March 2012),

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-923X.2011.02259.x/pdf>

The authors defend the role of the state and refer to 'The Big Society' agenda as the Coalition government's: '*ideological narrative..... (and) a justification for a determination to reduce the role of government and cut public expenditure*'. (p.3)

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-923X.2011.02259.x/pdf>

<sup>429</sup> Polly Toynbee, '*David Cameron's men go where Margaret Thatcher never dared*', Comment is Free, The Guardian, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/sep/17/cameron-goes-where-thatcher-never-dared>

See also:

Polly Toynbee & David Walker, *Dogma and Disarray: Cameron at Half-Time*, (Granta Books, London, 2012), e-book

<sup>430</sup> Helen Grady, BBC Radio 4, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2011, '*Blue Labour: Party's radical answer to the Big Society?*,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12759902>

political hue<sup>431</sup>. This has been evident in the appearance of alternative yet similar concepts based on localised and co-operative activity, namely 'Blue Labour', 'The Purple Book'<sup>432</sup> and the 'good society',<sup>433</sup> the latter phrase which was also utilised by Labour's arch-revisionist Anthony Crosland in the 1950s<sup>434</sup> as a reaction to the perceived growth of an overbearing state. All such developments reflect the traditional teleocratic emphasis of Labour policy and its focus on aiming for devised or utopian ends based on a form of planning for a future socio-political settlement. However the Big Society approach does not offer such an explicit plan or outcome to its agenda, yet it does align itself with some elements of New Labour's repeated focus on 'rights and responsibilities' within society. Such reactive developments from the Labour Party have been evident under Ed Miliband's leadership from September 2010 onwards, promoting a vision of government (particularly influenced by Lord Glasman) that also offers a reduced reliance on the role of the state, an embracing of more responsible capitalism and a return to the pre-1945 focus of Labour governments with a greater emphasis on utilising voluntarist and co-operative activity to deliver public services where appropriate<sup>435</sup>. Although the Labour left can cite the various failings of pre-1945 Labour governments as a reason not to hark back to their distinct ethos, this reciprocal development on the political left-of-centre could be used as evidence for a degree of success in Cameron's promotion of a new and innovative social agenda for the Conservative Party and the need for political opponents to adapt accordingly, appearing to embrace a less 'statist' agenda in the process. It also indicated that Labour was perhaps re-thinking its approach to public service delivery along more pragmatic, flexible and creative lines within the context of an economic slump and an austerity agenda.

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<sup>431</sup> See Jon Cruddas & Andrea Nahles, *'Building the Good Society: the project of the democratic left'*, (Compass Think-tank, 2009):

<http://www.compassonline.org.uk/publications/item.asp?d=985>

<sup>432</sup> See Robert Philpot (ed.), *The Purple Book: A Progressive Future for Labour*, Progress, (Biteback, London, 2011)

<sup>433</sup> Allegra Stratton, 'Ed Miliband rehearses 'good society' guru's lines in conference speech', *The Guardian*, 28<sup>th</sup> September 2010,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/sep/28/ed-miliband-speech-maurice-glasman>

<sup>434</sup> Anthony Crosland, *The Future of Socialism*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1956)

<sup>435</sup> Lord Maurice Glasman, a Labour peer and an academic at London Metropolitan University, has been credited with framing Labour's response to the 'Big Society' agenda, coining terms such as 'Blue Labour' and the 'Good Society' in the process.

Other serious thinkers from the modernising wing of the Conservative Party have also attempted to define its apparent vague meaning into a more concrete political entity that will work in the party's favour in terms of its enhanced clarity to the wider electorate, although they have also implied that it does not have to be an explicitly partisan or 'party political' entity in the process:

*'The big society, which is ultimately about creating and releasing latent sources of social energy, is an extraordinarily ambitious conception of how this underperformance occurred, and how to address it.....The big society is not itself either a left- or right-wing idea'*<sup>436</sup>.

Such sentiments clearly imply that in an ostensible era of less adversarial and less explicitly ideological politics, the 'Big Society' project could be comfortably pursued by either a Conservative or Labour administration in a re-aligned political paradigm, and in the autumn of both 2011 and 2012 the Respublica think-tank was lobbying the Labour Party Conference amid claims that some senior Labour figures wanted to 'save the Big Society agenda'<sup>437</sup>. As a corollary to this, in late 2012 influential Labour MP Jon Cruddas claimed that Labour had "missed a trick"<sup>438</sup> in failing to embrace its own version of The Big Society, and in his role as Labour's policy review co-coordinator he stated that "We want to build our own version of the big society. That's going to be a big part of our policy review over the next 12 months"<sup>439</sup>. This approach would endorse the view that the 'Big Society' transcends

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<sup>436</sup> Jesse Norman, Conservative MP for Hereford & South Herefordshire, 'Stealing the Big Society', Comment is Free, The Guardian, 8<sup>th</sup> February 2011,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/08/stealing-big-society-ed-miliband>

<sup>437</sup> Respublica sources speaking to author at Labour Party Conference, Liverpool, September 2011.

See also:

Oliver Wright, 'Labour to embrace David Cameron's 'big society'', The Independent, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2012,

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-to-embrace-david-camerons-big-society-8192956.html>

See also, Phillip Blond, Respublica think-tank, interview with author, 19th February 2013, who claimed that it is:

*'perfectly possible for the Labour Party to go back to genuine formative first principles and have a different relationship to The Big Society'.*

<sup>438</sup> Jon Cruddas, IPPR fringe event, Labour Party Conference (October 2012), Manchester, cited in Kayte Rath, 'Jon Cruddas backs Labour version of Big Society', BBC News website, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2012,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-19779457>

<sup>439</sup> Oliver Wright, 'Labour to embrace David Cameron's 'big society'', The Independent, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2012,

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-to-embrace-david-camerons-big-society-8192956.html>



traditional left-right politics, but many reformers and advocates of this agenda within the Conservative Party do remain wary of Labour embracing and adopting this policy approach, primarily due to the belief that it is essentially opposed to and in conflict with the 'Fabianist' and centralising instincts of Labour governments. As one of its leading advocates on the Conservative parliamentary benches has argued, the 'Big Society' idea fundamentally rejects:

*'the state-first Fabian dogma that is the specific political target of the big society ..... (but rather) emphasises the renewal of social capital, localism and greater personal empowerment. However, the big society also contains a robust critique of neoliberalism..... critical of the fundamentalism of free market uber-libertarians, who see no role for the state at all.....(and) is ultimately derived from the ideas of Edmund Burke and Adam Smith, who emphasized not rampant but limited markets; not the over-mighty state but free and independent institutions; not personal greed but trust and sympathy.'*<sup>440</sup>

This viewpoint therefore argues that the Big Society's essential localism and personal empowerment rejects both the 'statism' of the left and the 'neo-liberalism' associated with the free-market Thatcherism of the 1980s, and is essentially a modern, original and mainstream idea in tune with traditional conservative philosophical instincts (as well as the 'localist' agenda of the Liberal Democrats), and aligned with the natural and instinctive communitarian tendencies evident across broader society. One active advocate of the 'Big Society' agenda has subsequently described it as representing an original fusion of political concepts and structures, reflecting *'not the two-way opposition of state vs. individual, but the three-way relation of enabling state, active individual and linking institution'*<sup>441</sup>. Other Conservatives with interests in the Big Society agenda do however acknowledge some

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<sup>440</sup> Jesse Norman, Conservative MP for Hereford & South Herefordshire, *'Hands off our big society'*, Comment is Free, The Guardian, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/sep/30/ed-miliband-speech-conservatives-business>

<sup>441</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Introduction, p.7

potential for Labour to exploit its key themes, principally due to the *'communitarian strand in Labour..... going back to the Methodist tradition of dissent'*<sup>442</sup>.

From another ideological angle however, there has been some right-wing criticism of David Cameron's ostensible abandonment of the economics-driven, individualist, neo-liberal focus of the Thatcherite era, which has consolidated the mainstream criticism that the policy is vague and unclear<sup>443</sup>. Within this context one backbencher has appeared to reflect the sentiments of many more 'traditionalist' Conservative MPs, in describing it as *"intangible and incomprehensible... odd and unpersuasive"*<sup>444</sup>, while a prominent Internet-based Conservative figure has labelled the policy:

*'as intellectually interesting as it is useless on the doorstep. It's so far removed from working families' current concerns that polls find, over time, that it is understood less rather than more'*<sup>445</sup>.

Such internal party criticism has generated concerns that the post-2005 Conservative agenda of David Cameron has abandoned traditional and hard-won political territory that the party seized after 1979, as well as becoming detached from the clear and coherent identity associated with it. This has been due to the emphasis placed by Cameron on an enhanced and revitalised social policy agenda that stresses the importance of co-operation and the benevolent 'mutualism' of relationships within 'society', and the nature of this revised agenda has raised suspicions from the right that the 'dead hand' of the state will continue to be unerringly and prominently present within such an approach. Such suspicion has perhaps been justified in policy terms in the form of Cameron's reluctance to cut taxes or make savings in key public services such as the NHS, which the Conservatives pledged

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<sup>442</sup> David Willetts MP, interview with author, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012

<sup>443</sup> Jason Beattie, *'Tory MPs turn on Big Society architect Steve Hilton'*, *Daily Mirror*, 25th January 2011, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/2011/01/25/tory-mps-turn-on-big-society-architect-steve-hilton-115875-22873820/#ixzz1gKUxZfxp>

<sup>444</sup> Jo Johnson, Conservative MP for Orpington, cited in:

*'Tory MPs turn on Big Society architect Steve Hilton'*, *Daily Mirror*, 25th January 2011

<sup>445</sup> Tim Montgomerie, Editor of Conservative Home website, *'David Cameron may be error-strewn. But there's no alternative ... yet'*, Comment is Free, The Guardian, 12<sup>th</sup> April 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/apr/12/david-cameron-no-alternative-yet>

during the 2010 General Election would be ring-fenced from any future spending cuts<sup>446</sup>, despite a common right-wing complaint that it is an inefficient and excessively bureaucratic organisation<sup>447</sup>. Although there is fierce political debate about the true nature of Cameron's controversial NHS reforms (see chapter 7), Cameron's counter-argument to internal party critics from the right is that his own specific vision of an increasingly voluntarist, 'rolled-back' yet benevolent state model is actually consistent with one of Thatcher's greatest political and philosophical inspirations:

*'The virtues these people possessed (British)..... were independence and self-reliance, individual initiative and local responsibility, the successful reliance on voluntary activity..... and a healthy suspicion of power and authority'*<sup>448</sup>.

The above language of Hayek is notable for its explicit rejection of the 'collectivist' state whose growth was said to unerringly accelerate under left of-centre governments, and which established what has been described by one Conservative moderniser as *'the rotten postwar settlement of British politics'*<sup>449</sup>. Hayek's sentiments can therefore be said to be wholly consistent with the support for such a voluntarist approach and the vision for reduced statist welfare provisions as espoused by both Cameron's 'Big Society' gurus and bodies such as the Centre for Social Justice. Cameron's revised welfare and social agenda has therefore sought to maintain a delicate balance of preserving some inherent Conservative traditions while simultaneously developing a new and more refined social dimension to the party's contemporary image, calling for *'greater citizen involvement and empowerment..... (resulting in) the amplification and development of earlier ideas of compassionate Conservatism and post-bureaucratic politics'*<sup>450</sup>. Such desire for a more compassionate Conservative image has been reflected in Cameron's rhetorical focus on

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<sup>446</sup> David Blackburn, *Will the coalition rue ring-fencing health?*, The Spectator, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2010, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/6067993/will-the-coalition-rue-ringfencing-health.shtml>

<sup>447</sup> Andrew Sparrow, *'Cameron faces calls to disown Hannan NHS "mistake" criticism'*, The Guardian, Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> April 2009,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/apr/05/cameron-hannan-nhs-prescott>

<sup>448</sup> F.A Hayek. 'Material Conditions And Ideal Ends', cited in *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), Ch14, p.235

<sup>449</sup> Phillip Blond, *'Rise of the red Tories'*, Prospect magazine, 28th February 2009,

<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2009/02/riseoftheredtories/>

<sup>450</sup> Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010), Ch.4, p.89

society, and which appears to be an implicit rejection of the tough yet somewhat uncaring reputation the party had been associated with in relation to its social policy attitudes during its sustained period in power between 1979 and 1997, and this formed part of Cameron's wider strategy to 'detoxify' the brand<sup>451</sup>. His renewed focus on a refreshed and revised approach to social policy and its associated issues can be linked back to the period when he was striving to establish himself as an effective Leader of the Opposition, when he promised to adopt a distinct policy focus and stated that: *"I'm going to be as radical a social reformer as Margaret Thatcher was an economic reformer"*<sup>452</sup>.

However, despite some on the right of politics speaking about a '*post-bureaucratic state*'<sup>453</sup> and pushing for a perceived logical conclusion that entails a radically reduced level of reliance on state-provided welfare and the need for greater 'marketisation' of its core services, there has been a broad acceptance among the modernising 'Cameronites' that the state is required to retain a co-ordinating, if less cumbersome role in the delivery of social policy provision. So whereas the Thatcherites of the 1980s desired a 'strong state' yet limited government intervention as a means of delivering the necessary conditions for the 'maintenance of a free economy'<sup>454</sup> with a reduced emphasis on social and welfare policy, the 21<sup>st</sup> century Conservatives acknowledge that the markets alone are not sufficient to tackle the country's 'broken society' and wider welfare needs. Their 'Big Society' analysis therefore argues that the state's framework can be effectively used in instigating and formulating generic social policy goals and then devolving the process to allow innovative and 'localised' policies to flourish that are most appropriate to tackling specifically challenging social conditions and associated problems, with the state ultimately stepping back from such policies' direct implementation. By supporting and promoting the different and variable dimensions of government-initiated activity, a more detached state role can

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<sup>451</sup> See Matthew Taylor, 'Why the old ways won't work for Labour', January 22nd 2009, which highlights how Cameron's Conservatives 'have been pretty successful at detoxifying their brand'.

<http://www.matthewtaylorblog.com/politics/why-the-old-ways-wont-work-for-labour/>

<sup>452</sup> David Cameron, August 2008, cited in Philip Blond, 'Rise of the red Tories', Prospect magazine, 28th February 2009,

<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2009/02/riseoftheredtories/>

<sup>453</sup> See Matthew Taylor, 'The post-bureaucratic state', June 18<sup>th</sup> 2008, which describes the 'post-bureaucratic state' as a concept that 'combines social ambition with scepticism about the state'.

<http://www.matthewtaylorblog.com/politics/the-post-bureaucratic-state/>

<sup>454</sup> Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1994), Ch.2, p.44

therefore be fused with 'third sector' charities and localised bodies within a proposed model of 'creative' policy delivery that divides and fragments the role of providing core public services while also consolidating individual 'social ambition', ostensibly saving money and liberating individuals from excessive and centralised 'statism' in the process. In this respect the politics of Cameron's modern-day Conservatives ultimately appear to be distinct from the libertarian, free market and more ideological agenda of the neo-liberal Thatcherites, arguing that:

*'Whatever talk there is of a post-bureaucratic state..... State action, not limited government, is necessary because there is recognition that however important market-led growth is to fixing the broken society, it is not enough. There are real problems of poverty and social breakdown that a political economy based on the incentives of market forces cannot fix'*<sup>455</sup>.

Given the focus on austerity and financial savings as the driving force behind many key government decisions from May 2010 onwards, some critics from the Labour Party and the centre-left of the political spectrum have questioned whether Cameron's vision of a more devolved and 'enabling' welfare state, with an increased focus on self-help and the support of variable 'voluntarist' providers as opposed to direct state provision, is actually a genuine and original post-Thatcherite policy development or merely an extension of the economic and social priorities of the 1980s and the mood of economic austerity often associated with aspects of this historical period. Replacing direct state provision with greater voluntarist and charitable involvement is by no means guaranteed to provide a more solid basis for innovative and sustainable social policy development, and indeed, in the worst case scenario it could create serious risks to both the sustainability and the comprehensive and regulatory aspects of the British welfare state and its historic focus on protecting society's most vulnerable citizens. Therefore by reducing the hegemonic influence and role of the state as part of the 'Big Society' agenda, yet at the same time pursuing a programme of fiscal retrenchment and eroding some of the support for

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<sup>455</sup> Stephen Driver, "'Fixing our Broken Society": David Cameron's Post-Thatcherite Social Policy', cited in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.6, p.95

charitable institutions that often bolster state provision and which are expected to have an enhanced role under the original Big Society model, this potentially increases the prospect of vulnerable individuals being excluded from its 'non-universal' and fragmented welfare provision. This has led to high-profile interventions from prominent religious figures also, with the retiring Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams condemning the policy in the summer of 2012 as *"aspirational waffle designed to conceal a deeply damaging withdrawal of the state from its responsibilities to the most vulnerable"*.<sup>456</sup> In this context, some critics have claimed that such policies represent an attempt to revert back to the pre-1945 era when the role of the state was much smaller and its modern range of welfare services fragmented between a range of different providers including charities, local agencies and voluntary groups. Such a scenario directly conflicts with the more generous and statist 'social democratic' welfare model that has been dominant for most of the post-war period in Britain, and it is in this respect that the 'Big Society' proponents have struggled to convince the sceptical public.

### **The Big Society's role and influence within Conservative Social Policy**

In the context of developing a critique and a background narrative to the evolution of the party's new social policy agenda and its overall approach to administering a streamlined and genuinely reformed welfare state provision, David Cameron has specifically sought to re-frame the relationship of the contemporary Conservative Party with its neo-liberal socio-economic agenda of the past, revising and modifying its relationship with the party's Thatcherite legacy in the process<sup>457</sup>, in public terms at least. This has subsequently led to a more 'compassionate' Conservative analysis of a 'broken' or 'atomised' society that needs to be genuinely healed in the long-term, and such 'compassionate conservatism' appears to be a distinct contrast to the short-term punitive outlook and broad lack of sympathy aimed in the direction of long-term recipients of the welfare system, as was the tendency of some

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<sup>456</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, cited in 'Williams attacks Big Society idea', Press Association, The Observer, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/feedarticle/10304929>

<sup>457</sup> See Andrew Rawnsley, 'David Cameron's ambivalent relationship with the lady in blue', The Observer, Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> October 2010,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/oct/10/cameron-thatcher-spending-cuts>

right-wing Conservative politicians during the 1980s<sup>458</sup>. Yet Cameron's distinct approach to dealing with such a fractured society is not to call for more state intervention, but instead argue that the state needs to do less and that other agencies should absorb some of the strain in order for the emergence of '*the active citizen as philanthropist and volunteer*'<sup>459</sup> to also take some burden off the state, but which at the same time potentially marginalises some of the more vulnerable members of society. In adopting this stance, Cameron has explicitly rejected the state's '*accompanying ideology of centralisation, managerialism and intervention*'<sup>460</sup> that has prevailed for most of the post-war period.

However, Cameron has faced significant difficulties in 'selling' his specific analysis of society to both his political party and the wider public, along with struggling to overcome some scepticism about how his less 'statist' solutions can be practically implemented. He has been further hampered by the fact that many politicians, notably some Conservative ones, have rejected the blanket and perhaps simplistic Big Society analysis implying that all aspects of British society were 'broken' and required such a radical overhaul when the Conservative-led coalition came to national power in 2010. For example London Mayor Boris Johnson has openly questioned the mantra<sup>461</sup>, rejecting its arguably simplistic conclusions as "*piffle*". In his affirmation and determined emphasis as to just how 'broken' Britain was when the Conservatives have found themselves back in national office in 2010, it could be legitimately claimed that '*the Conservative leader is in danger of exaggerating the social problems facing Britain today*'<sup>462</sup>. Certainly there are significant enclaves of poverty and deprivation throughout British society, (exacerbated by rising levels of unemployment amidst the prolonged economic recession), many of which are long-established and which

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<sup>458</sup> In 1981, Conservative Cabinet Minister Norman Tebbit demanded that the unemployed "*get on their bikes*" and look for jobs, comments that were criticized as being unsympathetic to those living in areas with a high volume of unemployment.

<sup>459</sup> Ben Kisby, 'The Big Society: Power to the People?', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol.81, No.4, (October-December 2010), p.490

<sup>460</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.1, p.25

<sup>461</sup> Boris Johnson, '*What on earth has come over our aimless, feckless, hopeless youth?*', cited in the Daily Telegraph, 19<sup>th</sup> August 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/borisjohnson/3561544/What-on-earth-has-come-over-our-aimless-feckless-hopeless-youth.html>

<sup>462</sup> Stephen Driver, '"Fixing our Broken Society": David Cameron's Post-Thatcherite Social Policy', cited in Simon Lee & Matt Beech (eds.), *The Conservatives under David Cameron: Built to Last?*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch.6, p.90

have been sustained under different governments of different political affiliations who have administered the nation's welfare provision during different periods of modern history. However those that are hostile to Cameron's critique of 'broken Britain', situated on both the left and right of British politics, argue that its analysis is too primitive and its message too gimmicky, and that it needs to be grounded in greater practical realism, without distorting or exaggerating the state of contemporary society in order to generate party political benefit. Political opponents have also questioned whether such 'compassion' and focus on greater efficiency is in fact a mere rhetorical smoke-screen to justify significant public spending cutbacks and an ideology-driven reduction in the size of the state.

Ultimately, if such an analysis is to be constructive, effective and be able to carry the necessary weight and subsequent public support, it requires appropriate intellectual rigour and practical reality behind it. Iain Duncan Smith's experiences with the Centre for Social Justice and his subsequent thorough analysis of proposed socio-political remedies appears to have the potential to instil a greater degree of realism and credibility into this overall hypothesis of British society, although the nature and effectiveness of his detailed proposals in this key area of public policy remain to be seen. Thus, in the context of the search for a post-Thatcherite identity, the Conservative Party leadership under David Cameron has aligned itself with the desire for a speculative post-bureaucratic model of governance as identified and alluded to by contemporary academics and political thinkers. There has subsequently developed some significant further analysis of the key socio-economic issues and problems that exist within modern society and how best to address them, with *The Big Society* a prominent example of an innovative critique of how a revised vision of social justice can best be achieved within a reconstructed state, coupled with a revised social and welfare policy agenda. In promising to deliver a renewed and changed approach to the social policy sphere, David Cameron has been a central figure in this high-profile socio-political debate since his accession to senior political office from late 2005, but his arguments for a genuinely 'changed' post-bureaucratic vision of government for the future, as well as its capacity to effectively and practically deliver key and innovative social policies, have yet to convince much of the political community along with the wider British public.



## Social Policy Case Studies- Addressing the 'broken society' and promoting greater social justice?

### (1) The 'Free Schools' Policy

Within the overall thesis, this chapter seeks to focus on a prominent social policy of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government that has been implemented since May 2010, the 'free schools' education agenda. As a high-prolife component of the 2010 Conservative Party manifesto<sup>463</sup>, the proposal then came to practical policy fruition within the coalition arrangement with the Liberal Democrats in seeking to *'promote the reform of schools in order to ensure that new providers can enter the state school system in response to parental demand (and) that all schools have greater freedom over the curriculum'*<sup>464</sup>, this educational initiative provides a pertinent and contemporary indicator of how Conservative Party social policy has evolved and developed since the party lost national power in 1997. It also illustrates how the Conservatives have sought to utilise the educational sphere as a means of addressing their specific perceptions and interpretation of social injustice within contemporary society, and the overall development of this agenda, along with the evolution of its associated principal aims and specific socio-political principles, is a useful means of assessing how the modern Conservative Party has sought to adapt and infuse its own ideological heritage and distinct political traditions into contemporary social policy formulation. In taking this approach, the policy that has emerged has in many ways also represented a pragmatic reaction to the realities of a political landscape moulded by thirteen years of a Labour administration, and it is therefore a pertinent policy to analyse and evaluate to assess as to how much it appears to be similar or distinct from the dominant political traditions that have preceded it, namely the New Labour period of government

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<sup>463</sup> 2010 Conservative Party manifesto, *Invitation to join the Government of Britain*, 'Raise Standards in Schools', p.51-53,  
<http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Activist%20Centre/Press%20and%20Policy/Manifestos/Manifesto2010>

<sup>464</sup> See *'The Coalition: our programme for government'* (May 2010), p.28-29,  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-coalition-documentation>

(1997-2010), or the Thatcherite and Major era of Conservative rule and its eighteen-year duration from 1979 onwards.

Such a distinct and innovative policy therefore offers the potential to assess the influences that have shaped it, as well as comparing and contrasting the extent of both continuity and change between the outlook and attitudes of the contemporary Conservative Party leadership towards this key element of social policy, and then offer a valid comparison to the approach of previous governments of the modern political era in relation to this policy sphere. It is also a means of illustrating the nature of mainstream British Conservatism's re-formulated and more 'modern' and much-heralded compassionate attitude towards social justice and associated policy-making in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly from a perspective held by the Cameron Conservatives that the left's conventional vision of social justice has fundamentally failed to deliver in its desired aims over recent periods of Labour government, and indeed for most of the post-war 'consensus' era between 1945 and 1979. Within this context, according to one contemporary Conservative moderniser there has been an *'internal difficulty on the left in that many of the things that were designed to support social justice..... actually ended up hurting it'*<sup>465</sup>. This rejection of such conventional left-of-centre statist and bureaucratic solutions to issues connected to social justice have ultimately been evident and observed in the post-1979 Conservative focus on education as a key policy area that can actively improve social mobility and generally enhance the quality of life for British citizens, but with a greater focus on individualism as an alternative framework in which to operate.

Modern Conservatism's approach to educational policy has been fuelled by a prevailing and influential political ethos of the post-1979 period, namely the *'belief in markets and a minimal state..... (and the) view that the route to tackling poverty and educational underachievement lies in greater responsibility'*<sup>466</sup>, rejecting the state-knows-best ethos in the process. This acceptance of a greater degree of autonomy in education has been broadly accepted to differing degrees by all governments since 1979, fuelled by

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<sup>465</sup> Jesse Norman, MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire, interview with author, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2012

<sup>466</sup> Sonia Exley and Stephen J. Ball, 'Something old, something new: understanding Conservative education policy', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.6, p.97

external bodies such as the OECD that have claimed that *‘countries that delegate managerial discretion to headteachers and school governing bodies often have higher educational attainment’*<sup>467</sup>. Indeed, it is a valid and important area of discussion to assess whether this particular socio-political viewpoint, that was instilled into the public policy agenda after the Conservatives came to power in 1979, has been altered by a long period of exile from national office during a sustained spell of centre-left government that moulded its own distinct political agenda and culture, and whether a genuine and original brand of ‘New Conservatism’ has emerged as a result. From another angle of the same scenario, this policy also provides a means of indicating how the party’s broader political aspirations in this policy sphere have been affected and influenced by forming a coalition government in an alliance with a junior partner (the Liberal Democrats), who have a broadly different ideological outlook on such matters, and whose traditional position on such education and social policy matters has appeared more willing to rely on the dominance of the state, based on the premise that *‘liberalism could only be delivered by “big government solutions”’*<sup>468</sup>. However, as the coalition has been formed and evolved since May 2010, there have emerged some key areas of common ground in educational policy, namely the shared focus of a more localist broad outlook, as well as specific policies such as the ‘pupil premium’ in particular, an ostensibly Liberal Democrat policy which the Conservatives have also enthusiastically supported, and which has been claimed to represent the *‘freeing up and empowerment of disadvantaged individuals..... as much a Conservative as a Liberal Democrat policy’*<sup>469</sup>.

## The Origins of the Free Schools Policy

Following the Conservative Party’s resounding ejection from national office in 1997, the subsequent years of political opposition led to a period of sustained introspection and

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<sup>467</sup> Adam Leeder and Deborah Mabbett, ‘Free Schools: Big Society or Small Interests?’, cited in Jason Edwards (ed). *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012), p.133

<sup>468</sup> David Laws, *22 Days in May: The Birth of the Lib-Dem Conservative Coalition*, (Biteback, London, 2010), Diary extract Monday 10th May 2010, p.139.

<sup>469</sup> Jesse Norman, MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire, interview with author, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2012, See also David Laws, Diary extract Friday 7<sup>th</sup> May 2010, p.69: *‘George (Osborne) replied that the Conservatives supported the policy (pupil premium) and that he was happy to work with us to look how it could be funded’.*

review of the party's broader political identity and purpose. Within this context, one of the many policy areas that the party sought to address in terms of re-formulating a revised and refreshed agenda was in the specific realm of educational provision within the wider sphere of social policy. This was a policy area that had the potential to impact on significant swathes of the electorate, and its identification as a key issue to address was part of a specific strategy of the Cameron leadership within this recent historical period to 'decontaminate' the party's brand by primarily focusing on issues that had a more 'communitarian' emphasis, with the party keen to embrace a more 'compassionate' image overall. In doing so, Cameron sought to attach to such policy areas a distinct Conservative perspective, and the contemporary Conservative Party has therefore sought to develop a modernised social policy agenda that has aspired towards the achievement of enhanced social justice coupled with greater social mobility, with the implication of a reduced role for the state as part of the process. This has represented a challenging target for any political party, and the fusion of such core motives at the heart of educational policy-making have been at the crux of the party's recent attempts to devise an alternative and viable counter-narrative to the approach of New Labour in office from 1997 onwards.

In the context of succeeding thirteen years of Labour government, the Conservatives inherited a state of affairs that had seen New Labour under both Blair and Brown, despite some initial caution, progressively invest significant amounts of public spending in core educational provisions. Investment in education averaged 3.9% a year during Labour's period in office<sup>470</sup>, with funds steadily pumped into the service's core buildings and infrastructure from a largely centralised and interventionist 'command and control' style of government. However the New Labour approach to key social policy areas like education also retained some aspects of local autonomy in pragmatic recognition of the significant educational reforms of the Conservative administrations between 1979 and 1997<sup>471</sup>, and in the words of one academic commentator '*New Labour took the Conservative infrastructure*

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<sup>470</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies, '*Public Spending under Labour*' (2010), 2010 Election Briefing Note No.5, (Robert Chote, Rowena Crawford, Carl Emmerson, Gemma Tetlow), p.9

<http://www.ifs.org.uk/bns/bn92.pdf>

<sup>471</sup> See '*School Standards and Framework Act (1988)*', that diluted Conservative introduced Grant-Maintained Schools and replaced them with 'Foundation Schools', which retained some, if less, autonomy:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/31/contents>

(on education policy) and gave it meat and teeth<sup>472</sup>. There was ultimately a gradual build-up and enhanced focus by the post-1997 Labour administrations on programmes and educational initiatives which entailed major capital investment from the centre of government, a prime example being such as the 'Building Schools for the Future'<sup>473</sup> (BSF) policy, which emerged during Labour's third term in office from 2005 onwards and which had the lofty initial ambition of rebuilding or refurbishing all of England's 3,500 secondary schools, at an estimated cost of £55 billion. This policy clearly adhered to the party's 1997 high-profile focus on "*education, education, education*", and this was a clear example of the trend towards increased bureaucratization and levels of educational documentation that had appeared in the modern political era from 1979 onwards, with *'the pace of reform being especially frenetic after the victory of New Labour in 1997'*<sup>474</sup>. However, in an acknowledgement to the neo-liberal trends of the 1980s, while a significant degree of centralised funding was a consequence of this policy, the use of PFI<sup>475</sup> to deliver many of these educational projects appeared to represent a more modern 'neo-liberal' market-driven influence on the traditional model of state intervention and investment in public services. Such a significant degree of centralised planning and bureaucracy that accompanied this policy initiative appeared to downgrade the focus and emphasis on schools autonomously and responsibly managing their own organisational affairs alongside enhanced educational choice for the individual that had been established by the modern (post-1979) Conservative Party in this sphere<sup>476</sup>. It was this extent of central government expenditure and additional bureaucracy that generated criticism from the then Conservative opposition, who claimed that a future Conservative government would be committed to tackling such statist tendencies that stemmed from *'New Labour (being) excessively*

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<sup>472</sup> Sonia Exley and Stephen J. Ball, 'Something old, something new: understanding Conservative education policy', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.6, p.110

<sup>473</sup> See Department for Education, *'Building Schools for the Future'*:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/adminandfinance/schoolscapital/funding/bsf>

<sup>474</sup> Clyde Chitty, *Education Policy in Britain*, (Palgrave-Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2004), Ch.3, p.33

<sup>475</sup> PFI (Private Finance Initiatives) - A model of funding public services, e.g. schools or hospitals, first used in the UK in the early 1990s. The bulk of investment is provided by a private company, and the state then pays back the amount involved (with interest) over a period of subsequent years.

<sup>476</sup> An example of this could be seen in the abolition of the assisted places scheme that subsidised low income families to send their children to independent or private schools, see *'Education (Schools) Act (1997)'*:

[http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/1997-education-\(schools\)-act.pdf](http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/1997-education-(schools)-act.pdf)

*managerial in its conception of both the private and public sector*<sup>477</sup>. As a consequence, the axing of BSF was one of the first major decisions taken by Michael Gove after becoming Secretary of State for Education in May 2010, with the excessive costs and bureaucracy cited as the key reason why the programme could no longer be justified in an era of significant economic austerity.

As innovative and original policy-making in all spheres became more in demand as the economic downturn erupted from 2008 onwards, the revived emphasis on fiscal conservatism led to a desire within the Conservative Party for the development of social policies that would provide enhanced value for money for the taxpayer, yet which would also offer the prospect of strengthening the traditional Conservative ethos of individualism alongside the more modern emphasis on compassion and social justice within social policy provision. One commentator has observed that the economic crisis was a key turning point and arguably a major disruption to the Conservative modernisation project, when '*an era of austerity and serious economics had dawned*'<sup>478</sup>. This development would initiate the need for a more frugal approach to government and involve greater flexibility, enterprise and a more fragmented model of government on the whole. Within the generally expensive sphere of social policy matters, educational policy has traditionally been a significant area of public spending over the course of the post-war era of the comprehensive welfare state, and in practical terms this subsequently led to a significant surge of Conservative interest in an educational policy with a more efficient and cost-effective aura that originated on the European continent, namely the 'free schools' initiative. This policy particularly derived from the socio-political experiences of Sweden from the early 1990s onwards, which in this period elected a non-socialist government for the first time since the 1930s, and as a result of such a radical political swing the country's long-established and centralised welfare model and bureaucratic educational system came under scrutiny by the incoming political regime. One academic observer has described such a development as a reflection and

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<sup>477</sup> Maurice Glasman and Jesse Norman, *The Big Society in Question*, cited in Jason Edwards (ed). *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012), p.11

<sup>478</sup> Matthew d'Ancona, '*Ditching their modernisation campaign was the Tories' worst strategic error since the poll tax*', The Daily Telegraph. 30th December 2012, [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/matthewd\\_ancona/9770645/Ditching-their-modernisation-campaign-was-the-Tories-worst-strategic-error-since-the-poll-tax.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/matthewd_ancona/9770645/Ditching-their-modernisation-campaign-was-the-Tories-worst-strategic-error-since-the-poll-tax.html)

An edited version of Matthew d'Ancona's chapter in Ryan Shorthouse (ed.), *Tory modernisation 2.0: the future of the Conservative Party*, (Bright Blue, London, 2013)

acknowledgement that the global influences of *'Neo-liberal politics (had) come to Sweden'*<sup>479</sup>, somewhat belatedly in relation to the New Right hegemony that had infiltrated Britain and the USA during the 1980s.

The innovation of 'free schools' was devised as a decentralised alternative to universal policy delivery by the centralised and bureaucratic state, and as a model of educational provision it has been described as offering *'state-independent schools'* whose functions would be delivered by *'independent providers of different sorts'*<sup>480</sup>. The localised role and focus of such bodies would, according to the policy's advocates, remove the cost and inefficiency of centralised bureaucracy, respond to local needs and ultimately provide better value for money for the hard-pressed taxpayer in the long-term. This model of education has experienced significant growth since its inception in Sweden, as *'the number of pupils in free schools has increased from 20,247 pupils in 1995/96 to 95,948 pupils in 2009/10'*<sup>481</sup>. The rapid expansion of such a system based on the premise of an enhanced degree of freedom and autonomy from state control at a central level was viewed by those on the political right as an attractive, effective and efficient mechanism for increasing overall educational standards, social mobility and individual choice. One academic observer has described such policy trends emerging in Britain as marking a departure from *'a more managed Labour response'* in relation to educational policy-making from 1997 onwards, and instead moving towards *'a more libertarian Conservative one'*<sup>482</sup>. Such schools could therefore utilise a more diverse and wider range of tools and mechanisms to raise standards while creating a greater sense of efficiency and dynamic detachment from the state in the process, with private and community sector interests having greater opportunity and potential to access and influence the delivery of state educational services and provision,

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<sup>479</sup> Susanne Wiborg, 'Swedish Free Schools: Do They Work?', *LLAKES Research Paper 18*, (Institute of Education, University of London, 2010), p.8:

<http://www.llakes.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Wiborg-online.pdf>

<sup>480</sup> Sonia Exley and Stephen J. Ball, 'Something old, something new: understanding Conservative education policy', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.6, p.101

<sup>481</sup> Susanne Wiborg, 'Swedish Free Schools: Do They Work?', *LLAKES Research Paper 18*, (Institute of Education, University of London, 2010), p.11:

<http://www.llakes.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Wiborg-online.pdf>

<sup>482</sup> Sonia Exley and Stephen J. Ball, 'Something old, something new: understanding Conservative education policy', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.6, p.112

and in the process undermining what has traditionally been a hegemonic role for the state in this respect.

### **Arguments for the Free Schools Policy**

The free schools policy therefore came to hold attractions for Cameron from an early phase of his leadership from late 2005 onwards, as the Conservative Party sought to re-invent its social policy agenda in the wake of a demoralising third successive electoral defeat. From the outset, his primary aim as leader was to develop original and innovative policies that would generate wider public and electoral support in order to avoid a potentially fatal fourth general election defeat in a row. As the policy's formulation developed while in opposition, Cameron's Shadow Education Secretary Michael Gove emerged as a key figure within its evolution, and in pushing the free schools agenda, he justified his support for this re-modelled concept of public service provision by attacking Labour's record in this policy area after over a decade in power. Apparently damning statistics that *'almost half of children from deprived backgrounds leave school without a single good GCSE'*<sup>483</sup>, provided some core evidence that broader social and specific educational inequality had been maintained and even exacerbated under New Labour's 'statist' public service agenda that was a prominent feature of its prolonged period in office. This bolstered Gove's faith in the decentralised and devolved free schools as a solution to the problem, and he therefore envisaged such institutions as a means of delivering the vital socio-political assets of greater social mobility and enhanced social justice within traditionally disadvantaged parts of society, with such specific terms forming key elements of the vocabulary of 'modern' Conservatism in this social policy sphere:

*'Schools should be engines of social mobility..... the education system isn't delivering social mobility at the moment..... we wanted to overturn that injustice (and) we looked to social democratic Sweden for reform. Fifteen years ago the Swedes decided*

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<sup>483</sup> See Michael Gove, *'A Failed Generation: Educational Inequality under Labour'* (2008), [http://educar.files.wordpress.com/2008/08/a\\_failed\\_generation.pdf](http://educar.files.wordpress.com/2008/08/a_failed_generation.pdf)

Also cited in Sonia Exley and Stephen J. Ball, 'Something old, something new: understanding Conservative education policy', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.6, p.101



*to challenge declining standards by breaking the bureaucratic stranglehold over educational provision and welcome private providers into the state system. Since they introduced their reforms, 900 new schools have been established in Sweden, a country with a population one-sixth the size of England. Those new providers have not only created schools with higher standards than before, the virtuous dynamic created by the need to respond to competition from new providers has forced existing schools to raise their game. There is a direct correlation between more choice and higher standards; with the biggest improvements in educational outcomes being generated in those areas with the most new schools*<sup>484</sup>.

Michael Gove's confident assertion that greater competition and choice instilled by an influx of enterprising private involvement would raise standards was a controversial one in terms of how it challenged some fundamental conventions of the post-1945 welfare state, namely due to its absolute belief in enhanced localism and decentralisation as opposed to the relatively entrenched 'state knows best' ethos. However Gove could cite some evidence from Sweden to support his claims that such schools improved overall standards by instilling enhanced levels of competition into the system<sup>485</sup>, and in adopting this stance he appeared to be seeking a return to an era when the state was less comprehensive and controlling in its remit, and where a greater diversity of public service provision existed and offered enhanced choice for the citizen. In doing so, Gove seemed to embrace the influence of the writings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Conservative scholar Michael Oakeshott<sup>486</sup>, who was critical of the left's utopian vision and state-centred approach to shaping and moulding civil society into a more engineered and manipulated direction, which he referred to as an 'enterprise society'. Oakeshott ultimately rejected such an artificial and state-induced enterprise society as he saw it, and instead envisaged the alternative development and distinct evolution of a more natural and traditional 'civil association' that

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<sup>484</sup> Michael Gove, 'We need a Swedish education system', The Independent, Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/michael-gove-we-need-a-swedish-education-system-1048755.html>

<sup>485</sup> See Anders Böhlmark & Mikael Lindahl, IZA (Institute for the Study of Labour, Bonn, Germany), Discussion Paper Series No.2786, 'The Impact of School Choice on Pupil Achievement, Segregation and Costs: Swedish Evidence', (May 2007), <ftp://repec.iza.org/RePEc/Discussionpaper/dp2786.pdf>

<sup>486</sup> See Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, (Clarendon Press, London, 1975)

is ‘organised as a communal enterprise or undertaking in its own right’<sup>487</sup>, which focuses on greater individual choice at a grassroots level and the primacy of citizens obeying the rule of law rather than a desired socio-economic outcome being imposed from the centre of government. Such a model of society would entail citizens having roles, values and autonomous social goals within their communities which they are fully conscious of and which are detached from the state’s explicit control, direction and instructions. This approach can be aligned with this educational policy’s fundamental emphasis on creating greater autonomy for key public bodies such as schools, although to what extent this could occur due to natural local enterprise and autonomy and without the state’s guiding hand is one of the major practical challenges facing this social policy.

The fundamental driving-force behind the free schools policy is the notion that that providing more varied choice of schools and instilling a more enterprising emphasis will create improved standards in this sphere of public policy and address areas of genuine educational need. This policy agenda has subsequently been a dynamic area of modern political debate and dispute between the two major parties within British politics, and it would continue to attach itself to this policy as it evolved in government after 2010. Cameron’s strategy appeared to want to utilise this and other social policy initiatives as a means of depicting the Conservatives as a forward-looking and modern political party, equating such policies with the seemingly dynamic political values of ‘*progressivism..... modernism and the future as opposed to (Labour’s) statism and egalitarianism, (and) to portray New Labour as the party wedded to a backward looking repressive centralism*’<sup>488</sup>. Gove visited Sweden in early 2010 to see how such schools worked in practice, and fuelled by supporting academic research<sup>489</sup>, developed an enthusiasm for a more diverse selection of educational provision with an enhanced role for the private sector and a subsequent

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<sup>487</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics* (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.6, p.97

<sup>488</sup> Robert M. Page, University of Birmingham, ‘*Clear Blue Water? The Conservative Party’s Approach to Social Policy Since 1945*’, Paper to be presented at the Social Policy Association’s Annual Conference, University of Lincoln (5th-7th July 2010), p.11  
<http://www.social-policy.org.uk/lincoln/Page.pdf>

<sup>489</sup> See Anders Böhlmark & Mikael Lindahl, IZA (Institute for the Study of Labour, Bonn, Germany), Discussion Paper Series No.2786, ‘*The Impact of School Choice on Pupil Achievement, Segregation and Costs: Swedish Evidence*’, (May 2007),  
<http://repec.iza.org/RePEc/Discussionpaper/dp2786.pdf>

greater range of choice for parents and pupils, culminating in the policy's inclusion as a prominent and distinctive aspect of the 2010 Conservative Party manifesto. Its enhanced and explicit focus on promoting individual choice and wider social responsibility certainly appeared to have the desired effect and created a distinct area of '*clear blue water*'<sup>490</sup> between the Conservatives and the outgoing Labour government in this policy sphere in particular. In pursuing such a policy the Conservatives were seeking to form a clear and sharp '*political contrast between the centralisation of the Brown era and the decentralisation that is characteristic of the philosophy of the (alternative) Cameron government*'<sup>491</sup>. The policy was accordingly initiated following the party's return to national office, and after a period of planning and preparation that entailed 323 bids for free school status, the first wave of 24 free schools opened in September 2011. One of the most prominent of these new educational institutions was the West London Free School<sup>492</sup>, whose high-profile creation was instigated by the author and journalist Toby Young<sup>493</sup> and other local parents.

The policy has been rolled-out at a fairly rapid rate, and in November 2011, '*the government announced it had ear-marked an extra £600m on building 100 new free schools in England over the next three years*'<sup>494</sup>. A further fifty-five free schools were confirmed as opening in the autumn of 2012<sup>495</sup>, tripling the number in England alone<sup>496</sup>, and reaching 79 in total. This further expansion was part of a rolling process of applications for this status, with a further wave of applications for free school status having been established by the

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<sup>490</sup> Robert Page, University of Birmingham, '*Clear Blue Water? The Conservative Party's Approach to Social Policy Since 1945*', Paper to be presented at the Social Policy Association's Annual Conference, University of Lincoln (5th-7th July 2010), p.13

<http://www.social-policy.org.uk/lincoln/Page.pdf>

<sup>491</sup> Jesse Norman, MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire, interview with author, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2012

<sup>492</sup> West London Free School:

<http://www.westlondonfreeschool.co.uk/>

<sup>493</sup> Toby Young, '*Swedish-style free schools will raise standards – and, more importantly, they will increase choice*', The Daily Telegraph, February 19th 2010, <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tobyyoung/100026654/swedish-style-free-schools-will-raise-standards-but-more-importantly-they-will-increase-choice/>

<sup>494</sup> BBC News website, '*Q&A: Free schools*', 3rd September 2012,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-13266290>

<sup>495</sup> Department for Education, '*Free Schools opening in 2012 and beyond*',

<http://education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/freeschools/b00197715/free-schools-2012>

<sup>496</sup> BBC News website, '*Free school numbers to rise by 55, government reveals*', 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2012,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-19460927>

government from February 2012 (for opening in the autumn term of 2013). Those opening in subsequent phases of the policy's roll-out during 2012-13 have featured a diverse array of groups including Christian charities, former soldiers, football clubs<sup>497</sup> and existing private schools among those applying for the status.<sup>498</sup> Within this rolling programme of free schools being established, of the provisional proposals for 102 new free schools approved in the summer of 2012<sup>499</sup>, a third had a religious ethos<sup>500</sup>, and following on from his initial foray into secondary education, Toby Young applied to open a further primary institution attached to his original West London Free School within the next phase of proposed free schools announced in mid-2012<sup>501</sup>, primarily due to the apparent popularity of his initial educational venture:

*'Over 1,000 children applied for our second batch of 120 places this year (2012), making us the most over-subscribed secondary in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham..... The teaching unions warned us that free schools would increase social segregation, but ours hasn't. On the contrary, it's a genuine comprehensive'*<sup>502</sup>.

Such popularity as evident in the number of applicants forms the basis of Toby Young's determined viewpoint that such schools generate social and community integration rather than segregation, and that such a diverse range of grassroots bodies expressing a

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<sup>497</sup> Ben Turner, 'Everton FC's new free school opens', Liverpool ECHO, October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012, <http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/liverpool-news/local-news/2012/10/02/everton-fc-s-new-free-school-opens-100252-31944651/>

See also Everton Free School website:

<http://community.evertonfc.com/education/everton-free-school/>

<sup>498</sup> Jessica Shepherd, 'Free-school applications reopen with ex-soldiers and evangelicals in running', The Guardian, Monday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/feb/13/free-school-applications-soldiers-evangelicals>

<sup>499</sup> Andrew Woodcock, '102 new free schools win approval', The Independent, Friday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/102-new-free-schools-win-approval-7941333.html>

See also:

Department of Education, Free Schools,

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/freeschools/a00211685/2013>

<sup>500</sup> Jeevan Vasagar, 'Third of new free schools are religious', The Guardian, Friday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/jul/13/third-new-free-schools-religious>

<sup>501</sup> Anna David, 'London poised for new wave of free schools', London Evening Standard, 2nd July 2012, <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/education/london-poised-for-new-wave-of-free-schools-7903632.html>

<sup>502</sup> Toby Young, The Commentator website, 'The free schools revolution', 11<sup>th</sup> October 2012, [http://www.thecommentator.com/article/1788/the\\_free\\_schools\\_revolution](http://www.thecommentator.com/article/1788/the_free_schools_revolution)

committed interest in this policy area offers major advantages to the country's education system, for in bringing a variety of experiences they offer the prospect that *'the groups responsible for free schools are likely to be better at setting up and running schools than politicians and bureaucrats, with a firmer grasp of what a good education looks like'*.<sup>503</sup> This argument is therefore aligned with the devolved and localist sentiments and theories at the heart of the policy's formulation and direction.

### **The challenges for free schools**

The initial wave of such schools were established amidst a degree of hostility and opposition from some local authorities and politicians on the left<sup>504</sup>, largely fuelled by fears from this political perspective (supported by the teaching unions), that in adopting a more fragmented and diverse approach to educational policy delivery, they were undermining the broadly egalitarian principles of education that provides and protects minimum and uniform standards, and which are administered and regulated by the centralised state and its devolved local education authorities. The Free Schools advocate Toby Young has described such hostility from left-wing politicians, commentators and teaching unions as akin to *'rabid opposition'*<sup>505</sup>. The left of the political spectrum have been critical of the free schools 'revolution' as it is often termed by both proponents and opponents, particularly in relation to its de-regulated nature that ostensibly by-passes aspects of the state's bureaucratic structure and its accompanying mechanisms and prescribed procedures. A potential negative consequence of this policy as highlighted by this viewpoint could be seen in the chaotic closure of one proposed free school in Yorkshire just days before it was due to open in the autumn of 2012<sup>506</sup>. A further example of such de-regulation and potentially harmful avoidance of government bureaucracy emerged in early 2015 when the LGA voiced critical

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<sup>503</sup> Toby Young, E-mail interview with author, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2012

<sup>504</sup> For example: Barbara Jordan, *'Halton councillors object to Sandymoor free school'*, Runcorn and Widnes World, Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> December 2011, [http://www.runcornandwidnesworld.co.uk/news/9436804.Free\\_school\\_could\\_cost\\_us\\_3m\\_and\\_teachers\\_jobs\\_say\\_councillors/](http://www.runcornandwidnesworld.co.uk/news/9436804.Free_school_could_cost_us_3m_and_teachers_jobs_say_councillors/)

<sup>505</sup> Toby Young, The Commentator website, *'The free schools revolution'*, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2012, [http://www.thecommentator.com/article/1788/the\\_free\\_schools\\_revolution](http://www.thecommentator.com/article/1788/the_free_schools_revolution)

<sup>506</sup> Graeme Paton, Education Editor, *'Anger as Coalition halts free school project'*, Daily Telegraph, 27th August 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/9502200/Anger-as-Coalition-halts-free-school-project.html>

comments that free schools do not have to adhere to national food standards when providing school meals<sup>507</sup>.

The most fundamental form of criticism is that far from raising standards and improving quality and social justice within the education system, the policy will in fact create greater inequality and social divisions in its more arbitrary methods of educational provision, primarily due to its essentially neo-liberal, free market approach to meeting educational demand, with fears being raised that such schools *'are being funded by money taken from other schools ..... (with) no account of how the schools will be joined up with other local schools and services ..... (with the possibility of a) free-for-all undermining other schools'*<sup>508</sup>. Indeed one critical commentator has gone as far to say that the approach of the Conservative Party to this area of policy-making after 2010 is to *'break up and privatise English education'*<sup>509</sup> within a wider de-regulation of welfare and social policy delivery, while other critical comments have warned that by replacing uniform central state-driven provision *'with local voluntary providers the claim of rights is reduced to an act of charity'*<sup>510</sup>, and such a policy stance therefore appears to undermine people's rights to the full range of welfare state support. Convincing the broader political spectrum of their value is therefore a significant challenge, however, in a similar vein to other spheres of social policy since 2010, the left-of-centre have reacted in varying ways to free schools, with prominent Labour peer Lord Adonis a particularly strong advocate who has argued that his party should fully support their development<sup>511</sup>.

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<sup>507</sup> Local Government Association (LGA), *'Schools duck "moral duty" to dish up healthy meals'*, 13<sup>th</sup> January 2013,

[http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/media-releases/-/journal\\_content/56/10171/3839479/NEWS-TEMPLATE](http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/media-releases/-/journal_content/56/10171/3839479/NEWS-TEMPLATE)

<sup>508</sup> Stephen Twigg MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Education, E-mail questionnaire response, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

<sup>509</sup> Seamus Milne, *'Crony capitalism feeds the corporate plan for schools'*, The Guardian, Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> February 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/feb/14/crony-capitalism-corporate-schools?newsfeed=true>

<sup>510</sup> Roy Hattersley and Kevin Hickson, *'In Praise of Social Democracy'*, *The Political Quarterly*, Vol.83, Issue 1, (January-March 2012), p.7

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-923X.2011.02259.x/pdf>

<sup>511</sup> Andrew Adonis, *'Labour should support free schools — it invented them'*, The New Statesman, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2012,

<http://www.newstatesman.com/education/2012/03/free-schools-labour-academies>

See also Andrew Adonis, *Education, Education, Education: Reforming England's Schools*, (Biteback, London, 2012)

The Swedish experience of free schools has also raised further potentially negative implications of this social policy, namely in that according to some academic analysis it has caused falling educational standards and enhanced levels of social division, with similar negative social patterns said to have emerged in another Scandinavian country, Denmark, since it also rolled-out a programme of devolved yet state-subsidised free schools over recent years<sup>512</sup>. While figures such as Toby Young dispute this argument and highlight conflicting data<sup>513</sup>, this debate goes to the heart of the Cameron government's educational agenda, with a critical attack on the policy arguing that free schools and their neo-liberal focus on market-driven individual choice will actually create greater social injustice, segregation and ultimately discriminate against poorer members of the community who will be less likely to utilise the opportunities offered by their establishment than the middle classes and their enhanced levels of 'social capital'. This would appear to be the exact opposite of the desired outcomes of the policy as outlined by Michael Gove, and would indeed suggest the replication of social policy failures that Gove sought to attach to many of the educational policies of the Labour government between 1997 and 2010. A key challenge for advocates of the free school agenda is therefore to achieve genuinely enhanced educational choice for citizens, while negating and preventing the potential for creating greater social and educational segregation in the process, which should in turn nullify criticisms of the policy.

### **Re-invigorated Conservative education policy**

Despite such vehement and concerted criticisms, the confident and re-invigorated Conservative educational agenda argues that as well as raising educational standards, the additional benefit of free schools is said to be evident in their initial popularity in meeting the needs of parents and the communities in which they are located, as according to one government minister, *'Parents are voting with their feet. Around two-thirds of Free Schools were oversubscribed for their first year. The West London Free School has just reported more*

<sup>512</sup> See S.Wiborg, *Education and Social Integration: Comprehensive Schooling in Europe*, (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009)

<sup>513</sup> See Anders Böhlmark & Mikael Lindahl, IZA (Institute for the Study of Labour, Bonn, Germany), Discussion Paper Series No.2786, *'The Impact of School Choice on Pupil Achievement, Segregation and Costs: Swedish Evidence'*, (May 2007), <http://repec.iza.org/RePEc/Discussionpaper/dp2786.pdf>

than 1,000 applications for 120 places in September 2012'.<sup>514</sup> Such figures would appear to vindicate the Conservative Party's faith in this policy as an alternative and populist approach to the universal and 'statist' approach favoured for much of the post-war era, and schools ultimately seek to adhere to the following core principles, as in essence they are:

*'all-ability state-funded schools set up in response to what local people say they want and need in order to improve education for children in their community'*<sup>515</sup>.

At a basic level such free schools are therefore still under the ultimate control of the state, albeit within a more arms-length relationship. This policy for more 'innovative' and flexible educational provision therefore aims to provide a more localised service and autonomous curriculum which is in theory accessible to the whole community and which offers a service model that utilises and devolves centralised state funds to allow such free schools greater independence and 'freedom' in terms of prioritising core functions and key decision-making on a day-to-day operational basis, particularly in relation to staffing, facilities management, curricular options and specific local requirements. The policy also seeks to offer enhanced levels of individual choice to parents in a consumerist style, and in this respect the approach has some parallels with the prevailing Conservative neo-liberal attitudes of the 1980s and the broad focus on improving parental options, reducing government intervention and bureaucracy (both central and local), enhancing the role for the private sector, instilling greater levels of competition within mainstream education and the broad de-centralisation of the state's educational scope and provision. This ethos was previously evident in the period between 1979 and 1997 in flagship policies such as grant-maintained schools, school league tables and city technology colleges, and which established elements of a more 'individualist' culture with educational policy that was maintained to a degree within aspects of New Labour policy from 1997 onwards, notably within the academy programme<sup>516</sup>. In many ways, the policy ultimately aims to strike a revised balance between

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<sup>514</sup> Lord Hill, 'Free Schools are a grassroots revolution', Politics Home, Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> February 2012, [http://politicshome.com/uk/article/46063/lord\\_hill\\_free\\_schools\\_are\\_a\\_grass\\_roots\\_revolution\\_.html](http://politicshome.com/uk/article/46063/lord_hill_free_schools_are_a_grass_roots_revolution_.html)

<sup>515</sup> Department for Education, Free Schools Policy: <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/freeschools>

<sup>516</sup> Department for Education: Academies, <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/academies>



uniformity and diversity within the provision of state education in Britain, within an underlying inference that there has not been sufficient diversity over recent years.

However, David Cameron and Michael Gove have emphasised what they believe is a radical and innovative edge to such a policy that transcends previous administrations and which genuinely reflects a form of 'New Conservatism', specifically in the way that groups of parents, community activists and local charities can operate as the ultimate instigators of such schools to meet specifically local educational needs and demands, an option that has not previously been available and which appears to instil an even more competitive and dynamic aspect to the delivery of such a vital social policy in the process. Conservative politicians who have actively promoted and supported this policy have also explicitly sought to integrate the ethos of 'free schools' within the core message and ongoing narrative of the broader 'Big Society' agenda and the 'localism' policy narrative since returning to power in 2010. This overall political agenda focuses on de-centralised, community-led activity across a range of social policies, promoting greater individual responsibility detached from the spectre of bureaucratic state control<sup>517</sup>, which in the view of this new brand of Conservatism seeks to instil '*variety, experimentation and local innovation*'<sup>518</sup> and '*innovation within the taxpayer-funded education sector*'<sup>519</sup> in a more diversified public service delivery overall. As a consequence, advocates of the policy dismiss fears from those on the political left that the enhanced competition caused by these new schools will cause greater segregation among and between neighbouring schools, but will instead act as a catalyst to generate enhanced choice and to raise '*standards all round..... (with such) new schools (acting) as a spur to their neighbouring maintained schools*'<sup>520</sup>, and on a wider social scale instilling an ethos that will '*make sure middle income and low income families benefit as much from those choices as high income families*'<sup>521</sup>.

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<sup>517</sup> See Dr Rob Higham, '*Free Schools in the Big Society: Aims, Governance and Inclusion*', Institute of Education, University of London (July 2011), <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/newsEvents/53603.html>

<sup>518</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Introduction, Ch.4, p.74

<sup>519</sup> Toby Young, E-mail interview with author, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

<sup>520</sup> Michael Gove, '*We need a Swedish education system*', The Independent, Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/michael-gove-we-need-a-swedish-education-system-1048755.html>

<sup>521</sup> Toby Young, E-mail interview with author, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2012

In this approach of seeking to raise standards by offering educational provision that in theory benefits all social classes and which derives from genuine grassroots demands where no previous institution was in existence, this policy is therefore distinct from what has gone before, and in turn it appears to offer a radical glimpse of the concept of post-bureaucratic politics in action, adhering to the basic premise that *'there is a difference between public services and state provision'*<sup>522</sup> in the sense that neither is mutually exclusive to the other, and that effectively functioning public services can be delivered away from the monopolistic control of the state. On a negative level however, there is anecdotal evidence from those involved in the application process to establish a free school, that the application process is so challenging and complex that *'there is a real danger that free schools become the sole preserve of those with the resources and capacity to take on such a huge undertaking, such as faith groups or independent schools'*<sup>523</sup>. This would suggest that the notion that everyone has equal potential to establish such a school is questionable, and that middle-class communities capable of *'exploiting (their) social capital'*<sup>524</sup> are at a major advantage over poorer and more deprived groups who seek to establish a similar educational institution.

This approach to educational provision following the Conservative Party's return to government in 2010 can however also be said to be broadly consistent and coherently aligned with the Conservative vision for education that has been established since 1979 in particular, whereby *'individuals, families, school staff and communities will be given "freedom" to "take responsibility" for the education system'*<sup>525</sup> within a less regulated and de-centralised model of policy delivery that allows schools to have greater choice and flexibility in the type of educational provision on offer. The enhanced ability of free schools to emerge and develop without a prior organisation being in place is viewed as one of its most radical aspects that ultimately transcends the Conservative policy agenda of the 1980s,

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<sup>522</sup> Jesse Norman, MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire, interview with author, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2012

<sup>523</sup> Toby Blume, *'Free schools: why applying was "utterly horrendous"'*, The Guardian, Monday 16<sup>th</sup> July 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/jul/16/free-school-community-involvement>

<sup>524</sup> Ibid.,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/jul/16/free-school-community-involvement>

<sup>525</sup> Sonia Exley and Stephen J. Ball, *'Something old, something new: understanding Conservative education policy'*, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.6, p.101

as does its more explicit use of commercial and non-public bodies as alternative sources of funding and service delivery. Many right-wing think-tanks such as the IEA have explicitly argued that the eventual outcome of this policy will be linked to an inherent profit motive that will be influential in the delivery of state education, and which will ultimately raise overall educational standards<sup>526</sup>, particularly for the lower social classes who have been guaranteed a proportion of places in such institutions due to the proposed non-selective nature of such bodies<sup>527</sup>, in social terms at least. Indeed within this context, free schools pioneer Toby Young has offered the powerful example that at *'the West London Free School..... 25% of our first cohort are on free school meals'*,<sup>528</sup> as a clear indicator of the diverse and varied social composition of their initial pupil intake. However this socially inclusive aspect of free schools has been challenged by figures that suggest that the first phase of free schools have on average taken a lower than average number of pupils who qualify for free dinners<sup>529</sup> than other schools in the same area or borough, which would appear to undermine their status as being vehicles for greater social mobility and raising questions as to whether they are fully representative of the wider community they wish to serve.

Other notable right-of centre think-tanks and policy lobbyists such as Policy Exchange have also been active in lobbying for similar reform of key social policy spheres, and Michael Gove was significantly one of this body's key founders in 2002<sup>530</sup>, representing an obvious and practical link between the origins of social policies such as free schools and contemporary political developments. Prominent educational charities such as The Sutton Trust<sup>531</sup> have consistently argued for enhanced opportunities being provided for bright

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<sup>526</sup> See Gabriel H. Sahlgren, *'Swedish Education and the Role of the Profit motive'*, IEA Discussion paper No.33 (2010),

[http://www.iea.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/files/Schooling%20for%20money%20-%20web%20version\\_0.pdf](http://www.iea.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/files/Schooling%20for%20money%20-%20web%20version_0.pdf)

<sup>527</sup> See an example of a Free schools admissions policy:

<http://www.westlondonfreeschool.co.uk/overview/admissions.html>

<sup>528</sup> Toby Young, E-mail interview with author, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2012

<sup>529</sup> Jessica Shepherd, *'Most free schools take fewer deprived pupils than local average, figures show'*, The Guardian, Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/apr/23/free-schools-deprived-pupils-average>

<sup>530</sup> See:

<http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/>

<sup>531</sup> See:

<http://www.suttontrust.com/home/>

students from disadvantaged backgrounds<sup>532</sup>, and free schools have subsequently been identified as a vehicle for providing such provision. Within this context, bodies such as the Sutton Trust want to ensure greater social mobility and opportunity for those from deprived backgrounds, with a priority of such schools being able to *'serve disadvantaged pupils to give preference to pupils from low income homes in their admissions criteria'* and that *"free schools" are established primarily in disadvantaged localities'*<sup>533</sup>. The role of such charities alongside various right-of-centre pressure groups and think-tanks such as the IEA, Policy Exchange, Civitas<sup>534</sup> and the New Schools Network<sup>535</sup> in broadly supporting Free Schools and in seeking to influence distinct initiatives and innovative policies in the educational sphere has been viewed by some as evidence of a thriving civil society existing within a separate sphere between the individual citizen and the state, offering specific evidence of the 'Big Society' in action.

Within such a model of government and society, these advisory groups are viewed in a positive manner as prominent and pro-active civic stakeholders, who are *'authoritative voices..... undertaking further commissions to deliver initiatives'*<sup>536</sup>. Indeed, the educational charity that is the New Schools Network (established in 2009), is run by Rachel Wolf, a former adviser to Michael Gove and which is viewed as a particularly significant organisation in having an initiating, enabling and co-ordinating role in the process of establishing free schools<sup>537</sup>. Such apparently pluralistic influence in policy formulation and implementation is

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<sup>532</sup> See: Sutton Trust Research Report, *'Ensuring less privileged pupils benefit from the Government's school reforms'*, 2nd September 2010,

<http://www.suttontrust.com/research/ensuring-less-privileged-pupils-benefit/>

<sup>533</sup> Sutton Trust Research Report, *'Ensuring less privileged pupils benefit from the Government's school reforms'*, 2nd September 2010, p.3 & 6

<http://www.suttontrust.com/research/ensuring-less-privileged-pupils-benefit/>

<sup>534</sup> Civitas: Institute for the study of Civil Society, see *'Commercial Free Schools benefit teachers and disadvantaged pupils'*, 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010,

<http://www.civitas.org.uk/wordpress/2010/12/17/commercial-free-schools-benefit-teachers-and-disadvantaged-pupils/>

<sup>535</sup> New Schools Network (offers support and advice for establishing free schools):

<http://newschoolsnetwork.org/>

<sup>536</sup> Sonia Exley and Stephen J. Ball, *'Something old, something new: understanding Conservative education policy'*, cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.6, p.109

<sup>537</sup> Hilary Wilce, *'Time for change: How a young woman plans to shake up the school system'*, The Independent, Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> November 2009,

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/schools/time-for-change-how-a-young-woman-plans-to-shake-up-the-school-system-1818636.html>

therefore viewed by those who share this new Conservative outlook as a positive aspect within the contemporary educational and wider social policy sector, and a further advantageous asset to be attached to the free schools policy. Such independent bodies, along with the establishment of the devolved free schools, are viewed by advocates of a decentralised and post-bureaucratic state structure as symbolising *'the heart of the Big Society'*<sup>538</sup> in practice, promoting an ethos that seeks to revive a genuine civil society and a rejection of the post-1945 'big state' era when autonomous and localised bodies were *'largely pushed to the margins'*<sup>539</sup> when it came to the practical implementation of such core government policies.

### **Does the 'Free Schools' policy represent a new type of Conservatism?**

It has already been alluded to that the 'free schools' policy in many ways reflects a consistent strand of Conservative thinking on educational provision that dates back to the advent of the New Right in the mid-1970s and the evolution of the Thatcher administration from 1979 onwards, namely in relation to the emphasis on devolving power away from the centralised, bureaucratic control of the state in order to meet local demand in a broadly neo-liberal model of governance. Conservative Party interest in educational policy was an evolving one during this period, as from the outset the government had a more economic agenda, and *'education was not a priority of the Government in 1979'*<sup>540</sup>. However, even the Thatcher administration had its own internal tensions in terms of moulding the country's educational policy during the 1980s, with internal conflict evident within the New Right political faction itself, between the radical neo-liberals who favoured even greater deregulation of the economy, and the distinct brand of Neo-Conservatives who were *'interested primarily in upholding 19<sup>th</sup> century notions of tradition, hierarchy and social order'*<sup>541</sup>, and who sought to retain a significant degree of centralised control of policy from the centre. It can be ultimately argued that despite Thatcher's own neo-liberal economic instincts and broad aversion to state intervention, it was Conservative politicians such as

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<sup>538</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.2, p.27

<sup>539</sup> Ibid., Ch.2, p.27

<sup>540</sup> Clyde Chitty, *Education Policy in Britain*, (Palgrave-Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2004), Ch.3, p.47

<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

Education Secretary Kenneth Baker who favoured maintaining a 'strong state'<sup>542</sup> as acknowledged by Gamble as a key tenet of the overall political doctrine of Thatcherism, and which sought to retain significant social controls from the centre of government along more authoritarian lines.

It was this more centralising and 'strong state' variant of modern Conservative thought that sought to instil and impose greater moral standards from a strong and co-ordinated centre which appears to have ultimately won the day, as domestic-orientated 'neo-Conservatism' appeared to have triumphed over more 'neo-liberal' influences in this policy sphere during this period of government. Such tendencies became evident in the emergence of key 'centralising' educational policies such as the National Curriculum in 1988<sup>543</sup>, which has remained in place to the present day, and which to the dismay of contemporary neo-liberals represented an avowedly bureaucratic element of government educational policy-making, taking up '*nearly 370 hours of parliamentary time and (giving) the Secretary of State 451 new powers*'<sup>544</sup>. Over twenty years later its centralised and co-ordinating role and content has come under the scrutiny of Michael Gove, whose decentralising policy agenda it appears to conflict with. With free schools only adhering to the core elements of this centralised curriculum and with greater flexibility in terms of the range and diversity of their subject provision as a result, Gove launched a formal review into the purpose and functions of the National Curriculum in early 2011<sup>545</sup>, with significant and potentially more flexible developments expected on this front in 2013-14 according to the government timetable on this subject.

In returning the party's attention to this key area of social policy while back in national office after 2010, the Conservatives sought to revive the debate of the 1980s, yet with a greater degree of de-centralisation, alongside an enhanced philanthropic emphasis, a

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<sup>542</sup> See Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and The Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1988),

<sup>543</sup> See the National School Curriculum:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum>

<sup>544</sup> Clyde Chitty, *Education Policy in Britain*, (Palgrave-Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2004), Ch.3, p.51

<sup>545</sup> Department for Education, '*National Curriculum review launched*', 20<sup>th</sup> January 2011 (updated 26th April 2012),

<http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a0073149/national-curriculum-review-launched>

greater degree of paternalistic compassion and a sense of communitarian zeal. Within this context, one of the Conservative ministers in charge of the implementation of the free schools policy from 2010 onwards has described the policy in radical terms as '*a grass-roots revolution*'<sup>546</sup>, and some of the policy's most enthusiastic supporters have argued that it has transcended the 1980s policy agenda in that it has more genuinely radical connotations, with the nature of its 'grassroots', bottom-up approach its key innovative aspect, with anywhere or anyone in theory being able to instigate such a school if the appropriate localised organisation and funding can be put in place. Prominent media commentators from the libertarian right of the political spectrum such as Fraser Nelson have subsequently proclaimed the establishment of free schools as a '*triumph*', particularly in the rapid pace of their introduction and the fact that they may even struggle to keep up with demand fuelled by population growth and increased pupil numbers in some parts of the country. This radical vision of educational provision therefore seeks to promote an ethos of genuine post-bureaucratic individualism, meeting localised needs while also diluting, yet not eliminating in influence entirely, the previously dominant influence of the centralised state<sup>547</sup> in the delivery of this key social policy within the public sector. Key regulatory bodies such as OFSTED maintain a monitoring role of such bodies, while the Secretary of State ultimately retains the power to suspend any school that appears to be in breach of the terms of its 'Articles of Association'<sup>548</sup>.

Yet from another less supportive angle, it has also been suggested by sceptical political commentators that far from freeing schools from the tentacles of centralised state control, such regulatory controls of a financial and bureaucratic nature will continue to be an inevitable aspect of government intervention within the British education system, despite such an essentially decentralised approach to educational policy<sup>549</sup>. This it is

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<sup>546</sup> Lord Hill, '*Free Schools are a grassroots revolution*', Politics Home, Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> February 2012, [http://politicshome.com/uk/article/46063/lord\\_hill\\_free\\_schools\\_are\\_a\\_grass\\_roots\\_revolution\\_.html](http://politicshome.com/uk/article/46063/lord_hill_free_schools_are_a_grass_roots_revolution_.html)

<sup>547</sup> Fraser Nelson, '*Politics: Michael Gove's free schools are a triumph – but can they keep up with the baby boom?*', The Spectator, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2011, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/politics/all/7204973/politics-michael-goves-free-schools-are-a-triumph-but-can-they-keep-up-with-the-baby-boom.shtml>

<sup>548</sup> See Department for Education, Free Schools Model Funding Agreement: <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/freeschools/guidance/a0074737/funding-agreement>

<sup>549</sup> Simon Jenkins, '*Gove's claim to be 'freeing' schools is a cloak for more control from the centre*', Comment is Free, The Guardian, Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2010,

claimed, has been the fate of all such attempts to devolve educational provision in the modern political era, as it is argued that pure and genuine 'devolution' of this social policy is extremely difficult to achieve in practical reality due to the need for the existence of some basic minimum standards and regulations to be adhered to, e.g. the continued application of the centralised national school curriculum (created in 1988), or the regulatory monitoring of standards by OFSTED<sup>550</sup> (formed in 1992), as obvious examples. This has led to criticism that in practical terms the free schools policy is unrealistic in its deregulatory aspirations, as a genuine and credible educational policy simply cannot be as radically de-centralised as has been claimed by its advocates, and is therefore something of a paradox in practical terms:

*'Tory ministers claim to be decentralising power in our education system (yet) they are doing the complete opposite..... they have been quietly accumulating power in the centre. All new schools established by this government (academies and free schools) are reliant on central government funding, are accountable to ministers and civil servants, and are monitored through seven-year finance agreements decided in Whitehall'*<sup>551</sup>.

This particular line of criticism therefore suggests that despite the radical rhetoric associated with the free schools policy and its links with the broader vision of 'The Big Society', the practical reality is somewhat different in terms of disentangling such localised institutions from the centralised state and its bureaucratic labyrinths of Whitehall. One commentator has gone as far as commenting that such is the extent of government central control that *'Michael Gove's centralism is not so much socialist as Soviet'*<sup>552</sup>. It is indeed the central Whitehall machine that controls the funding for such educational bodies, in many ways simply bypassing and transcending the role previously held by local authorities in the traditional educational funding process, and this would appear to contradict the localist

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/may/27/michael-gove-free-schools-admissions-policy>

<sup>550</sup> See:

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/>

<sup>551</sup> Stephen Twigg MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Education, *'Evidence, not dogma'*, Progress Online, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2012,

<http://www.progressonline.org.uk/2012/02/02/evidence-not-dogma/>

<sup>552</sup> Simon Jenkins, *'Michael Gove's centralism is not so much socialist as Soviet'*, Comment is Free, The Guardian, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/11/michael-gove-more-soviet-than-socialist>



aims for the policy. The post-2010 government has been accused by the Labour opposition of subsequently prioritising financial investment in the educational arena to the free schools as opposed to centralised and more comprehensive and 'catch-all' policies such as the abandoned 'Building Schools for the Future' programme. This has allegedly led to poor value for money and low student numbers in some such bodies, within one commentator describing them as part of a *"free" (meaning expensive) state school movement*<sup>553</sup>, which lack genuine experiment and liberation, and which have created a two-tier and segregationist structure where free schools will find it difficult to integrate with existing local authority bodies.

### **The impact of coalition government on the free schools policy**

However the internal political pressures of coalition government can be said to have blurred the policy's focus and more radical edge, with the Liberal Democrats, who did not principally advocate this policy and have been more hostile and sceptical to its agenda on the whole<sup>554</sup>, appearing to restrain its more radical neo-liberal elements. As a consequence it would appear that a significant degree of state bureaucracy and restrictions will continue to exist and serve to limit the scope of commercial freedom and be imposed from the centre of government, with significant limitations and conditions demanded by Nick Clegg in relation to whether such schools can make a profit, although existing fee-paying private schools can apply for free school status and continue to charge for admission. Such limits and restraints being applied to the wholly radical, neo-liberal model of free schools delivery are likely to be retained in this policy sphere in the contemporary political period of 2010-15 at least, although the future vision of establishing free schools for profit is clearly a desired policy for some advocates of this policy who would like a scenario to emerge whereby *'after the first batch of free schools have been judged a success, the government will allow for-profit Education Management Organisations to set up, own and operate free schools, as they can*

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<sup>553</sup> Simon Jenkins, *'Michael Gove's centralism is not so much socialist as Soviet'*, Comment is Free, The Guardian, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/11/michael-gove-more-soviet-than-socialist>

<sup>554</sup> Jeevan Vasagar and Hélène Mulholland, *'Liberal Democrats vote to oppose free schools'*, The Guardian, Monday 20th September 2010,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/sep/20/liberal-democrats-oppose-free-schools>

*in Sweden and some American states*<sup>555</sup>. Such a scenario will almost certainly depend on the outcome of the General Election in 2015.

The coalition government's divisions in relation to the competitive, commercial and selective implications of the nature of educational provision and financial arrangements attached to the free schools policy ultimately chimes at the heart of a long-standing political debate within British politics and wider society, namely as to how to improve and reform educational provision in the UK. This centres on whether delivering core public services on a comprehensive, uniform basis is preferable to the alternative of allowing greater diversity within public service provision in order to meet specialist individual and finance-driven requirements, which supporters of free schools claim are the decisive dynamics behind government policy-making in this social policy sphere. The greater devolved status of such schools has the potential to create long-term prospects for the business and community groups behind such newly-established bodies to have commercial interests and profit incentives as a core factor in their involvement in such educational initiatives<sup>556</sup>, and this has been specifically evident in Michael Gove's decision to approve the opening in autumn 2012 for a wholly 'for-profit' free school, IES Breckland in Suffolk, by a Swedish private company, heralding a significant breakthrough for private involvement in the state education system, although such a model appears to be limited in its scope in the short-term at least. However, it is by no means certain that a desire for profit automatically equates to either improved public services or aligns with the communitarian emphasis of the broader Big Society agenda. However the most enthusiastic advocates of 'The Big Society' view the educational policy sphere as key testing ground to implement the various socio-political freedoms that the Big Society's framework *as 'a governing idea'*<sup>557</sup> seeks to steadily instil across all of society, and such reforms as free schools will ultimately alter the way that the public views the provision of public services. This in turn has the potential to enable *'a drastic scaling back of the national curriculum..... (and) the creation of new schools, be they*

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<sup>555</sup> Toby Young, E-mail interview with author, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2012

<sup>556</sup> Jessica Shepherd, 'Barclays puts up £1.25m for parents starting free schools', The Guardian, Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> January 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/jan/18/free-schools-barclays-money-parents>

<sup>557</sup> Jesse Norman, MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire, interview with author, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

*publicly or privately funded, and in corporate, trust or co-operative form*<sup>558</sup>, which will create an educational model featuring a diffusion and diversity of different types of state school, which is an explicit aspiration of the transformative nature of the ‘free schools’ education agenda and its prominent role in asserting a new brand of social conservatism.

### **The future direction of the free schools policy**

There are those of less ideological and visionary tendencies, and who instead adopt a more pragmatic socio-political outlook who would claim that such state bureaucracy and private commercial restrictions are inevitable when dealing with public administration and the need to guarantee a minimum of national standards. This latter point is consolidated by a sociological theory promoted by the prominent social scientist Max Weber in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>559</sup> who observed and argued that a more ‘bureaucratized society’ steadily develops due to the growth in size and complexity of states and communities, which therefore suggests that the contemporary aspiration of creating a wave of post-bureaucratic free schools is not based in practical reality given the significant demands and varied complexities of 21<sup>st</sup> century British society. In the sphere of education, this is a particularly pertinent argument given that during *‘the 20-year period from 1979 to 2000..... (there were) over 30 separate Education Acts, together with large numbers of accompanying circulars, regulations and statutory instruments*<sup>560</sup>. Such bureaucratic and socially complex trends, alongside critical theories and arguments appear to further question and undermine the ‘radical’ post-bureaucratic tenets of this policy as espoused by its principal advocates like Michael Gove, and which in the process appear to erode and suppress the radicalism of the apparent ‘freedoms’ that it creates, although it remains to be seen as to whether the ability of free schools to hire teachers without teaching qualifications<sup>561</sup>, the lack of need for

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<sup>558</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.7, p.140

<sup>559</sup> See Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, (Germany, 1922)

<sup>560</sup> Clyde Chitty, *Education Policy in Britain*, (Palgrave-Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2004), Ch.3, p.33

<sup>561</sup> See Department for Education. Free Schools FAQs Workforce:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/freeschools/freeschoolsfaqs/a0075663/faqs-free-schools-workforce#faq2>

Extract:

**‘Who can teach at a Free School?** - Innovation, diversity and flexibility are at the heart of the Free Schools policy. In that spirit we will not be setting overly prescriptive requirements in relation to qualifications.

conventional educational buildings, the progressive appearance of a more flexible curriculum and the emergence in future of greater commercial freedoms will improve such schools and make them more genuinely 'free' overall.

In its focus on de-centralised and more localised policy making, reduced bureaucracy and a greater emphasis on individual choice and needs, the Free Schools education agenda appears to chime in consistently with the wider Big Society narrative of the Cameron leadership, but its steady evolution as a policy has gone to the heart of the Conservative Party's delicate identity issues on its return to national office from 2010 onwards. The policy does appear to embrace some traditional Conservative political priorities that could be said to hark back to a pre-1945 model of society where mutualism, localism and enhanced local autonomy thrived before the comprehensive and universal welfare state was constructed. From a later political era, such 'neo-liberal', New Right principles that then demanded a reduced role for the centralised state also suggest that such a policy would not have looked out of place if it had been initiated during the heyday of Thatcherism in the 1980s. Indeed, there has been some arguments made that this educational flagship policy has maintained the neo-liberal outlook of the 1980s, but has been fused and instilled with a sharper focus on 'society' and '*incorporated elements of communitarianism*' within a '*re-imagined state*'<sup>562</sup>, an overall approach that fundamentally affects the structures of both central and local government. Within this analysis of the policy agenda, and despite its tendencies towards an enhanced focus on 'society', there are some that argue that the Free Schools policy is part of a wider, more radical political strategy from the right of the political spectrum that seeks to steadily erode the structural basis of the post-1945 model of the British state and its inexorable tendency to grow and expand, and in the process fundamentally challenge what this perspective views as a fundamental error at the heart of the post-war political consensus that '*a large state was a guarantor of good public services and social well-being*'<sup>563</sup>. The critical counter-argument to the viewpoint of those such as

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**Does this mean that Free Schools can employ unqualified staff?** - Free Schools do not have to employ teachers with Qualified Teacher Status (although certain specialist posts will still require QTS)'.

<sup>562</sup> Sonia Exley and Stephen J. Ball, 'Something old, something new: understanding Conservative education policy', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.6, p.101

<sup>563</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.2, p.26

Jesse Norman would appear to argue that such policies of New Conservatism are potentially *'dangerous..... In its genuine belief that charities and volunteers, rather than the state, can and should provide numerous, core public services'*<sup>564</sup>.

However, there is an alternative interpretation that the 'collectivist' and 'mutualist' influences within the Big Society and its associated goals and key policies such as 'Free Schools', have in fact represented a dilution of the 1980s Conservative 'free-market' agenda and this has subsequently distinguished it from the more individualist emphasis and arbitrary outcomes of pure neo-liberal policies. Within this viewpoint, the policy appears to acknowledge some aspects of the more paternalistic 'One Nation' Conservative tradition, particularly in response to criticism from the left that free schools are elitist and designed to cater for a largely affluent and middle-class market<sup>565</sup>, with the government insisting that all such bodies are not for profit and must guarantee that a significant proportion or quota of their intake come from poorer sections of society and not just a selective enclave of wealthier, middle-class families with enhanced levels of 'social capital'<sup>566</sup>. This again indicates an interventionist, bureaucratic element of this policy, and would appear to suggest that completely decentralised, de-regulated and devolved decision-making is not feasible or desirable in terms of meeting wider social and inter-connected community needs. Herein is the paradoxical element that lies at the heart of the free schools initiative, that such a localist policy requires the state to initiate the decentralisation and devolution of power and to maintain an influence, albeit a streamlined one, in the effective functioning of the policy going forward. The policy does however consistently correlate with the focus of past Conservative governments in at least minimising and reducing the state's centralised control and extending opportunity in a meritocratic manner to all pupils regardless of social backgrounds, as evident in previous Conservative policies such as the assisted places scheme and the party's ongoing affinity with grammar schools<sup>567</sup>.

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<sup>564</sup> Ben Kisby, 'The Big Society: Power to the People?', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol.81, No.4, (October-December 2010), p.490

<sup>565</sup> Ibid., p.488. Kisby argues that such schools:

*'work in favour of 'middle-class, advantaged communities with high levels of trust and strong networks or "social capital"'*

<sup>566</sup> Jessica Shepherd, 'Academies and free schools get right to reserve places for poorer pupils', *The Guardian*, Friday May 27<sup>th</sup> 2011,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/may/27/academies-free-schools-poorer-pupils>

<sup>567</sup> Martyn Oates, 'Tory MP: More grammar schools please', BBC News website, 15<sup>th</sup> November 2011,

This much-heralded emphasis on ensuring quotas of specific socio-economic groups within such free schools in order to tackle the ongoing cycle of social inequality and injustice in parts of the country would appear to reflect an approach to education policy that indicates a clear goal-based vision behind such an agenda, with an enhanced level of compassion instilled within a quasi-regulatory structure at the very least. This ‘determinist’ aspect of the policy goes to the heart of why initiatives such as ‘Free Schools’ illuminate a key debate at the heart of the whole Big Society agenda, notably in relation to the Oakeshottian approach of a ‘natural’ or instinctive sense of community activity and responsibility among ordinary citizens<sup>568</sup>, which rejects the rationalism of *‘ideology..... and (moves) towards pragmatic principle’*<sup>569</sup>. This is in contrast to the ‘rational’ and planned approach to governance as espoused by various (and often left-wing) ideologies that place a greater emphasis on theory and which alternatively seek to instil such values and activities into citizens via the state’s influence and intervention. Such a traditionalist Conservative rejection of utopian ends can be aligned to the philosophical debate regarding the fundamental nature of government, namely whether “nomocratic” (rule-based) governance featuring a neutral end or aspiration, is preferable to a “teleocratic” model of government, which instead focuses on a governmental approach that is designed to achieve specific ends or which has a desired outcome.

In applying such approaches to a specific policy such as the free schools programme, a key practical question that arises and which equally applies to the overall Big Society agenda and the evolution of a ‘New Conservatism’, is whether such a political narrative has specific ends or is it neutral and merely legalistic in its aspirations in line with the traditional and ‘natural’ Conservatism of Oakeshott? While the Big Society’s cloak around the free schools policy does seek to distance it from the explicit ideological positions of both the traditional left and right, this stance has been rejected by many teaching unions in particular who argue that *‘although the Government may indicate that they are introducing this*

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<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-15729781>

<sup>568</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, (Clarendon Press, London, 1975)

<sup>569</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.6, p.101

*programme to reduce disadvantage, the reality is that it is wholly an ideological move*<sup>570</sup> with its focus on a more diverse utilization of private educational provision. The policy does however appear to have a clear focus on addressing fundamental socio-economic problems with a degree of state interventionism, and although it is unclear how success and progress will be measured within this policy, advocates of the policy claim that as an eventual outcome *'this agenda may do more to improve equality than straight tax and spend'*<sup>571</sup>, and its centralising tendencies. This would suggest an emphasis on social outcomes that are linked to key political goals and values, and however vague such socio-political targets may be, this approach veers towards the teleocratic model where government via the various powers of the state seeks to guide public policy towards a broad and imprecise goal of some sort, although its utopian nature is likely to be limited.

Given such a quixotic fusion of variable Conservative traditions and ideological influences within this social policy's overall formulation, it remains a matter of conjecture as to which specific aspect or nuance of influence has been the dominant one in driving the Free Schools agenda forward and shaping its distinctive evolution in the years ahead. There appears to be some tensions between pragmatism and ideology within this policy sphere, with Michael Gove's more dynamic ideological emphasis being moderated by the caution of the Liberal Democrats alongside some more pragmatic Conservative figures, adjoined to the practical necessity of retaining state control of such educational bodies, and such factors have collectively instilled a steadier rate to the policy's reforming zeal. It remains to be seen as to which dimension or influence will take the more prominent role in shaping and moulding the policy in the long-term and as a result whether a genuinely new version of Conservatism emerges at the forefront of a credible and popular new educational agenda. Such a range of influences ultimately suggest a somewhat quixotic and ambiguous undertone to the policy's overall image and identity, and within such a context a compromise position would be that reforms such as the free schools policy can arguably be

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<sup>570</sup> NASUWT, *'Free schools: Why does NASUWT oppose free schools?'*, Accessed 8<sup>th</sup> May 2012, <http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/Whatsnew/Campaigns/VoteforEducation/FreeSchools/>

<sup>571</sup> Jesse Norman, MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire, interview with author, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2012

said to represent, in the short-term at least, a degree of *'common sense and a new perspective (as opposed to)..... more ideological commitments'*<sup>572</sup>.

However as a rebuke to the various critics of the policy who would prefer the policy to fade away and fizzle out, it has been claimed that the innovations attached to this policy appear to have created a *'competitive education quasi-market'*<sup>573</sup>, which has already made some fundamental and irrevocable changes to this sphere of British social policy that cannot be altered. Such developments suggest that a distinct and new political consensus will subsequently emerge on this issue, with *'free schools continu(ing) to be set up regardless of who wins the next election (as) the policy is irreversible, as the Swedes discovered in 1992'*<sup>574</sup>. This will entail yet another distinct feature or type of unit within the country's educational structure, nestled alongside comprehensives, grammar schools and academies in providing an increased diversity of schools via a broader range of providers as opposed to a hegemonic state monopoly, and creating something of a 'patchwork quilt' appearance for the country's system of state educational provision in the process. Although the number of such schools remains relatively small in number, whether their creation proves to be beneficial for wider society is not clear, as it has been claimed that policies that are fuelled by a wide number of devolved, quasi-private bodies do not always automatically equate to benefits for all of society, as in practice *'parental preferences over education are not fully aligned with the public interest'*<sup>575</sup>, indicating likely tensions between the communitarian instincts of civic engagement and the desire to ultimately instil commercial profit and viability within such institutions. The likely benefits or failings of the policy will only be confirmed or disproved over a significant period of time, and while it has certainly delivered change, it ultimately remains a matter of conjecture as to whether such contemporary socio-political developments are part of a long-term, broader shift towards the emergence of a genuine brand of 'New Conservatism' for the 21st century. Alternative propositions are

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<sup>572</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.7, p.141

<sup>573</sup> Adam Leeder and Deborah Mabbett, *'Free Schools: Big Society or Small Interests?'*, cited in Jason Edwards (ed). *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012), p.134

<sup>574</sup> Toby Young, E-mail interview with author, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2012

<sup>575</sup> Adam Leeder and Deborah Mabbett, *'Free Schools: Big Society or Small Interests?'*, cited in Jason Edwards (ed). *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012), p.143



that the free schools policy is merely a re-marketed reversion to the individualist market-led agenda of the 1980s, or that the pragmatic nature of Conservative 'statecraft', its associated populist tendencies and the desire to meet local needs and demands for primarily electoral purposes has been revived in all of its flexibility to be adaptable in the formulation of key public policies within national governance.

## Social Policy Case Studies- Addressing the ‘broken society’ and promoting greater social justice?

### (2) Reform of the NHS

This chapter of the thesis seeks to focus on a further area of contemporary and topical social policy that, similarly to free schools, has also aspired to address the ‘broken society’ and to maintain social mobility across the wider population, which in this instance features significant attempts by the Conservative-led coalition government to both effectively manage and simultaneously reform the key institution of the National Health Service since taking office in May 2010. Like educational policy, this pivotal area of welfare provision is an important aspect of modern British governance in the 21st century, and as a integral and high-profile component of the British welfare state it has been said to have ‘*no parallel in terms of its resilience, its longevity and its abiding appeal to the citizens of the United Kingdom*’<sup>576</sup>. The sheer size and complexity of the NHS as an organisation<sup>577</sup> particularly provides a significant political challenge to any administration in terms of making it function and operate in an efficient and effective way along the specific organisational or functional lines that it desires. As such a pivotal feature of British welfare policy provision, it therefore provides a clear opportunity for the modern Conservative Party to identify and illustrate just how original and innovative its approach is in dealing with another significant and increasingly expensive area of social policy since it returned to power following a thirteen year exile. Parallels can therefore be drawn with education policy, as both are high-profile aspects of governance with a ‘compassionate’ policy edge that equally affect large numbers of the population and both are therefore extremely potent as electoral issues. It is also a means of indicating whether the party’s proposals in this particular area of social policy represent any specific evidence of a revised attitude since its last period in government during the 1980s and 90s.

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<sup>576</sup> Brian Salter, *The Politics of Change in the Health Service*. (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1998), Introduction, p. 1.

<sup>577</sup> The NHS employs 1.7 million people according to figures from 2011: ‘*Only the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, the Wal-Mart supermarket chain and the Indian Railways directly employ more people*’.

Source: ‘About the NHS’:

<http://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/thenhs/about/Pages/overview.aspx>

## Historical Conservative attitudes to the NHS

On the surface at least, the refreshed and re-branded approach of British Conservatism towards the NHS in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century puts to the test the dynamic principles of the decentralised and localised aspects of the party's broader social policy agenda, the 'Big Society', which has been at the forefront of much of the party's recent rhetoric in relation to social and welfare issues. This subsequently raises the key question as to whether this social agenda's focus on '*self help, entrepreneurship and community energy*'<sup>578</sup> can be transferred into the monolithic and bureaucratic structure of the National Health Service, and even those who believe in the values of this decentralised socio-political approach have acknowledged the difficulties of this challenge, describing it in analogous terms of '*taking five or ten years of reversing the supertanker to try to get it heading in the other direction*'<sup>579</sup>. Such comments imply the need for a long-term strategy in the pursuit of such a socio-political agenda, and the Conservative Party's overall approach to this policy sphere ultimately raises important questions regarding the extent of the party's revised identity and broader modernisation of recent years. As a consequence, the question arises as to whether the party's emerging attitudes and policies in relation to the NHS represent a distinct alternative and a more compassionate approach in comparison with the ideological mood and neo-liberal political agenda attached to such social policies during the last sustained period of Conservative rule (1979-97), and therefore whether the party is offering continuity or change in its health policy.

The core emphasis of the National Health Service since its inception in the aftermath of World War Two was to provide a quality service based on need, and not ability to pay, and its central ethos was to provide quality health care "*from the cradle to the grave*". It has always been a particularly challenging area of policy to address for the Conservative Party, for the principal reason that the party originally opposed its creation when it was established by the reforming post-war Labour government in 1948, primarily due to its expensive burden on the taxpayer and its symbolic appearance as a vestige of bureaucratic,

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<sup>578</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.9, p.173

<sup>579</sup> Jesse Norman, MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire, interview with author, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2012

socialist government. This opposition produced particular scorn from Labour's Health Minister at the time, Aneurin Bevan, who denounced the Conservatives as "*being lower than vermin*"<sup>580</sup> for adopting such a position, and this hostile and somewhat 'toxic' analysis has adhered itself to the Conservative Party on this issue to a variable extent since. The NHS has subsequently remained broadly popular with the British public since its creation in the collectivist aftermath of World War Two, with British citizens placing great emphasis on the value of the service and the need for investment in it in both social and political terms, and this has made it a political challenge for politicians of all parties aspiring to be in government. Over the years different governments of all parties have therefore been faced with a '*never-ending public clamour for improved state health services*'<sup>581</sup>, and this historic legacy has meant that consequently the NHS has been significantly intertwined with politics and public opinion, principally due to the fact that it is ultimately a public body, directly funded by the taxpayer, and this has resulted in an ongoing political battle between rival parties to provide an appropriate selection of specific social and welfare rights to a demanding public.

The fundamental problem with seeking to address such elements of demand and supply within the NHS is that demand has appeared to be infinite and has experienced inexorable growth from an early stage of the service's existence and in the ensuing years. However in practical terms the supply of the service has clear practical and financial limits, and at times since 1948 this has led to a rationing and streamlining of resources in general, with some aspects of service having to be prioritised over others. In the post-1948 era of the NHS there have therefore developed significant political implications for politicians and their electoral fortunes in relation to NHS policy and their ability to manage the service effectively. In the context of significant public interest in the service and the general perception of the NHS as a pivotal aspect of welfare provision, it has become a key responsibility of government to determine '*how best to manage the gap between health*

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<sup>580</sup> Aneurin Bevan, Labour MP & Minister for Health, 4<sup>th</sup> July 1948, Manchester, see Socialist Health Association website:

<http://www.sochealth.co.uk/national-health-service/the-sma-and-the-foundation-of-the-national-health-service-dr-leslie-hilliard-1980/aneurin-bevan-and-the-foundation-of-the-nhs/bevans-speech-to-the-manchester-labour-rally-4-july-1948/>

<sup>581</sup> Brian Salter, *The Politics of Change in the Health Service*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1998), Ch.1, p.4

*care demand and supply*<sup>582</sup>, and it is within this context that if a scenario exists whereby the wider population believe that politicians are not managing this key area of social policy effectively:

*'they will legitimately demand that their elected representatives press for changes to be made. Thus politics and the NHS are rightly inseparable'*<sup>583</sup>.

As a corollary of such specific historical developments relating to the introduction of the NHS, as a policy area it *'has long been regarded as a core Labour issue..... especially so since the 1980s,*<sup>584</sup> when it came under pressure from the Thatcher government's focus on retrenchment, reform and neo-liberal marketisation. During this period the Labour Party campaigned to preserve and defend the organisation's original aims and structure amidst claims that its core basis was being eroded. This resulted in a political battle that was infused with ideological momentum, and this created both a social and political scenario where *'a strong body of public and official opinion..... saw the NHS as underfunded and ill-equipped to meet the legitimate expectations of its consumers'*<sup>585</sup>, a factor that further eroded the Conservative Party's image in relation to this sphere of the welfare state, with many critics questioning the party's levels of 'compassion' and commitment in its governance of this public service. In subsequent years, this specific aspect of social policy has become of even greater significance for the wider electorate, and can indeed be attributed as one of the key issues that influenced the electoral mood from the mid-1990s onwards, as *'between 1995-2007 opinion polls identified health care as one of the top issues for voters'*<sup>586</sup>. Such a socio-political development in turn provides a key reason in explaining the Conservatives' political unpopularity during the approximate decade after 1997, with many key voters viewing the party's initial unwillingness and reluctance to match the increased investment in the service during the first two terms of New Labour government in particular (until 2005), with suspicion.

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<sup>582</sup> Brian Salter, *The Politics of Change in the Health Service*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1998), Ch.1, p.15

<sup>583</sup> Ken Hesketh, Chief Executive Medway NHS Trust, Foreword p.ix, cited in Salter, (1998)

<sup>584</sup> Rob Baggott, 'Conservative health policy: change, continuity and policy influence', in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.5, p.77

<sup>585</sup> Brian Salter, *The Politics of Change in the Health Service*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1998), Introduction, Ch.1, p.5

<sup>586</sup> Rob Baggott, 'Conservative health policy: change, continuity and policy influence', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.5, p.77

Following a third successive general election defeat in 2005, the Conservative Party under David Cameron did explicitly acknowledge the need to maintain and consolidate Labour's public expenditure in this policy area, and this represented a '*fundamental rethink of strategy and policy*'<sup>587</sup> with regard to the NHS. However the party faced a difficult scenario whereby despite concerted attempts to improve the party's image on this issue during the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in particular, the party faced a harsh reality that '*most people never trusted them (the Conservatives) on it (the NHS) in the first place*'<sup>588</sup>, and this has ultimately hampered the party's political progress in relation to this policy area since it left national office in the late 1990s. This explains why there have subsequently been concerted attempts to de-toxify the party's brand, which have been influenced by and linked to this lingering suspicion and hostility from the wider public towards the party's motives in this particular policy sphere<sup>589</sup>. Such attempts at creating a more compassionate image in relation to health policy have also been undermined by a perception that many Conservative politicians remain critical of the NHS and its essentially statist principles and bureaucratic implications, with occasional outbursts on the issue from figures such as Daniel Hannan MEP, who in 2009 described the NHS to an American TV audience as a "*sixty year mistake*"<sup>590</sup>. Such views do not appear to correlate with the broadly favourable view of the NHS held by much of the wider British public, nor indeed the more moderate public 'line' of the modern Conservative Party leadership. The party's contemporary attitude towards the NHS has subsequently become a vital barometer of wider public perceptions of the modern Conservative Party, striking at the heart of its perceived intentions for such an integral

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<sup>587</sup> Rob Baggott, 'Conservative health policy: change, continuity and policy influence', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.5, p.89

<sup>588</sup> UK Polling Report, 'What causes poll movements', 21<sup>st</sup> February 2012, <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/archives/category/nhs>

<sup>589</sup> Samira Shackle, 'Same old Tories? The public turns against NHS reform', *The New Statesman*, 21<sup>st</sup> February 2012, <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2012/02/health-bill-nhs-poll>

<sup>590</sup> Daniel Hannan MEP, Interview with Fox News, 4<sup>th</sup> April 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiSPRkq28iU>

See also Andrew Sparrow, 'Cameron faces calls to disown Hannan NHS 'mistake' criticism', *The Observer*, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/apr/05/cameron-hannan-nhs-prescott>

aspect of British social policy that impacts on all of the population at some point of their lives.

### **David Cameron's focus on the NHS as an important socio-political issue**

During the sustained exile from national governance for the Conservatives between 1997 and 2010, the thirteen years in question saw the NHS gain further significance as a high-profile area of public policy during the longest period of Labour government in history. Its role towards the top of the political agenda was instigated by Tony Blair as part of Labour's electoral strategy from the mid-1990s onwards, with the NHS prioritised as an election issue during the 1997 general election campaign, and the New Labour leadership declaring emotively that there were only 24 hours to 'save it' on the eve of the party sweeping to power. This approach and policy agenda subsequently resulted in a significant wave of financial investment in the country's health service after 1997, with the rate of NHS spending steadily accelerating the longer that Labour was in power (see Table 1). The Labour government therefore appeared to adopt a clear political and electoral strategy of progressively investing in this key public service while markedly pointing the blame for failings in the service's administration and the associated apparent under-investment directly at the previous Conservative government. This approach created a political narrative that attracted and engaged many significant and important socio-economic groups within the electorate, and it sought to contrast the perceived under-spending of the Conservative years in office with '*a relatively long period of sustained real terms growth in public spending*'<sup>591</sup> on key public services such as health over the course of the Blair/Brown administrations after 1997, with significant public funds made available for this prominent area of social policy. Within the broader brush of this focus on enhanced investment were specific fiscal trends and intricacies, an example being '*particularly large average annual increases in spending on the NHS (5.7% a year)*'<sup>592</sup>, a factor that exposed Conservative weaknesses and vulnerabilities in its NHS policy approach while also chiming in with a

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<sup>591</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies, '*Public Spending under Labour*' (2010), 2010 Election Briefing Note No.5, (Robert Chote, Rowena Crawford, Carl Emmerson, Gemma Tetlow), p.5

<http://www.ifs.org.uk/bns/bn92.pdf>

<sup>592</sup> Ibid., p.9

<http://www.ifs.org.uk/bns/bn92.pdf>

broadly supportive public mood towards such explicitly inflationary trends in government expenditure on public health (see table below).

**Table 1**<sup>593</sup>:

<i>Year</i>	<i>Public spending on health as a percentage of GDP in England (1993-2009)</i>
1993-94	5.5
1994-95	5.6
1995-96	5.6
1996-97	5.4
1997-98	5.3
1998-99	5.3
1999-2000	5.2
2000-01	5.5
2001-02	5.8
2002-03	6.1
2003-04	6.5
2004-05	6.8
2005-06	7.1
2006-07	7.0
2007-08	7.2
2008-09	7.7

NHS policy was therefore an important component of New Labour's three successive general election victories over the demoralised and disjointed Conservatives (1997-2005), although the Blair/Brown approach to health policy after 1997 was somewhat ambiguous in its overall tone and direction, as alongside this significant additional spending the incoming government did not abandon the Thatcherite 'internal market' in its entirety, and indeed

<sup>593</sup> House of Commons, Hansard, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2009, Health Minister Mike O'Brien MP in response to Peter Bone MP about NHS expenditure in England, Column 1989-1990W, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm090909/text/90909w0021.htm>



maintained many of the market-driven, ‘consumer’ focused NHS reforms of the ‘choice agenda’ of the 1980s and 90s. This acceptance of a degree of private influence within the NHS was evident in the further use of private funding of NHS facilities in the form of PFI, the extension of the autonomy of hospital trusts into foundation hospitals, enhanced managerial responsibilities for doctors, as well as private non-state providers delivering aspects of NHS provision. This degree of bipartisan continuation of policy direction appeared to reflect a broad consensus that there would be a likelihood of variable levels of service and performance within an essentially state-run institution traditionally based on ‘universal’ principles, and this represented a pragmatic ‘Blairite’ acknowledgment of the realities of the existing system and its focus on patients as ‘consumers’ that was a legacy of the eighteen years of Conservative rule. As well as an awareness of the difficulties caused by massive organisational upheaval if such structures were totally abandoned, this more blended policy direction was consistent with New Labour’s potent tactic of ‘triangulation’ and desire to outflank its political opposition by adopting some of its policies, and in embracing aspects of choice and marketisation within the NHS, as a consequence this appeared to enigmatically blur the focus of New Labour’s NHS agenda and tilt it slightly *‘towards the policies pursued by the Thatcher and Major governments’*<sup>594</sup> in the process. Despite aspects of the party’s NHS legacy therefore being embraced by the incoming Labour government, a weak and untrustworthy Conservative image in relation to the NHS continued to persist in the wider public psyche, and this presented the party *‘with a significant problem, creating pressures for policy change’*<sup>595</sup>, a scenario that could be seen as an opportunity from the perspective of party modernisers, particularly so after the modernisers’ candidate, David Cameron, seized the party leadership in 2005.

Changes in relation to Conservative Party NHS policy and rhetoric began to evolve more substantially from an early stage of the Cameron leadership as the significance of a third successive general election defeat struck home. The newly-installed party hierarchy acknowledged the unpopularity of its apparent market-friendly ‘pro-private’ tendencies on this issue, with the key 2005 election policy ‘The Patient’s Passport’, which advocated state

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<sup>594</sup> Rob Baggott, ‘Conservative health policy: change, continuity and policy influence’, in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.5, p.79

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch.5, p.77

subsidies for private healthcare, rapidly discarded within the first month of Cameron's leadership<sup>596</sup>. Policy reform accelerated further as the Conservatives began to steadily regroup and threaten a return to national office from 2008 onwards in the wake of the onset of financial recession. Cameron's deliberate attention to this policy area from the outset of his leadership was an explicit aspect of his attempts as a party leader from a new generation who sought to achieve de-toxification in regard to the negative memories of past Conservative governments and their record on such social policy matters. It quickly appeared to be an area in which Cameron and his political allies were considered to be more liberal-minded and reformist, and this was initially evident in public comments from an early stage of his leadership, notably when he stated in his first party conference speech as leader that *"Tony Blair explained his priorities in three words: education, education, education, I can do it in three letters: NHS"*<sup>597</sup>. Cameron's personal connection to the issue was bolstered by to the NHS's treatment of his son's serious illness<sup>598</sup>, and this factor re-enforced NHS policy as his *"number one priority"*<sup>599</sup> should he be elected to lead a future government, further consolidated by his significant declaration that the creation of the service was *'one of the greatest achievements of the 20th century'*<sup>600</sup>.

This bold approach of promoting a modern brand of Conservatism that was steadily re-assuring in relation to the NHS appeared to directly confront a sceptical wider public and attempted to suppress the suspicions of the wider electorate towards Conservative intentions in relation to the long-term future of the largely popular public service, as well as addressing internal Conservative policy tensions relating to a policy area with a high level of public interest and electoral potency. In doing so Cameron was therefore determined to depict the party with a more caring and compassionate image within the wider socio-

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<sup>596</sup> Conservative Home website, *'Labour claim victory after Cameron abandons patient's passport'*, January 4th 2006,

[http://conservativehome.blogs.com/torydiary/2006/01/labour\\_claim\\_vi.html](http://conservativehome.blogs.com/torydiary/2006/01/labour_claim_vi.html)

<sup>597</sup> David Cameron, Speech to Conservative Party Conference, 4<sup>th</sup> October 2006, Bournemouth, cited in: BBC News website, *'NHS safe in my hands says Cameron'*, 4<sup>th</sup> October 2006,

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/5403798.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5403798.stm)

<sup>598</sup> David Cameron's son Ivan was born with severe epilepsy and cerebral palsy in 2002 and died in 2009. Cameron's experiences of the NHS treatment of his son were said to have shaped his support for enhanced investment and specific funding commitments in this service.

<sup>599</sup> See BBC News website, *'David Cameron says NHS at heart of Tory manifesto'*, 4<sup>th</sup> January 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8438965.stm>

<sup>600</sup> Cited in Patrick Wintour, *'Cameron claims role of NHS protector'*, The Guardian, 4<sup>th</sup> October 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2006/oct/04/publicservices.politics>

political framework, and this policy approach formed part of his broader political strategy of seeking to promote an enhanced and distinct Conservative-orientated version of social justice within society, albeit one with a less interventionist role for the state in practical political terms. Therefore in pursuing such a 'socially just' agenda, Cameron sought to emphasise that a specific undertone to such social policy formulation would aim to avoid the dominance of the centralised and bureaucratic state, and which would instead seek to provide opportunities for devolved levels of service provision and delivery via a more diverse range of non-state providers and various devolved structural elements within the NHS.

In taking such an ambitious route in what was effectively a dynamic re-formulation of his party's image regarding the NHS, Cameron swiftly acknowledged the need to be pragmatic in seeking the middle ground on such social policy issues, adopting an almost Blairite degree of pragmatism that '*brought the party much closer to Labour's position*'<sup>601</sup> in the build up to the 2010 General Election, primarily in terms of matching spending commitments and investment in the health service. This revision and prioritisation of health policy took on a more significant level as the general election approached with Cameron explicitly promising to '*back the NHS..... (and) increase health spending every year*'<sup>602</sup>, a manifesto promise subsequently re-enforced in the 2010 Coalition agreement with the Liberal Democrats, which pledged that '*funding for the NHS should increase in real terms in each year of the Parliament*'<sup>603</sup>. This was a somewhat conspicuously inconsistent position given that it appeared in the wake of a Conservative manifesto programme that was determinedly focused on securing significant public spending cuts in order to tackle the national deficit<sup>604</sup>. Cameron's brand of New Conservatism however felt that such required

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<sup>601</sup> Rob Baggott, 'Conservative health policy: change, continuity and policy influence', in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.5, p.79

<sup>601</sup> Ibid., Ch.5, p.83

<sup>602</sup> See Conservative Party 2010 Manifesto, *Invitation to join the Government of Britain*, 'Back the NHS', p.45: <http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Activist%20Centre/Press%20and%20Policy/Manifestos/Manifesto2010>

<sup>603</sup> See '*The Coalition: our programme for government*' (May 2010), p.24-26 [http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/coalition\\_programme\\_for\\_government.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf)

<sup>604</sup> See Conservative Party 2010 Manifesto, *Invitation to join the Government of Britain*, 'Change the Economy', p.6-7: <http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Activist%20Centre/Press%20and%20Policy/Manifestos/Manifesto2010>,

investment could be achieved by ensuring funds more efficiently arrive at frontline services within a distinctly less bureaucratic infrastructure, although there was a cautious condition to this otherwise ambitious fiscal pledge, with promises to increase annual spending on health underscored by the crucial addition that *‘the rate of increase under Labour would not be continued’*<sup>605</sup>. This was perhaps an acknowledgment that the rate of spending on the NHS had been on a dramatically upward curve and required more cautious and prudent rates of growth in future years, with Cameron acknowledging that *“In the past two decades, NHS spending has more than doubled in real terms from £38bn to £103bn”*<sup>606</sup>.

### **The political priorities of the NHS under Conservative governance since 2010**

On re-entering national office in 2010 as part of a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, Conservative ministers were keen to emphasise the party’s much-heralded pre-election pledge of increased financial investment in this key public service, a stance that would fulfil a significant manifesto commitment and which broadly aligned itself with the more expansive health policy of the junior coalition partners. This prominent commitment to substantial NHS investment represented a relatively consistent policy stance throughout the Cameron leadership era and also aligned itself with attempts by party modernisers to mould a more compassionate public image as part of the broader strategy of embracing the ethos of vigorous, dynamic and innovative public service provision in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Cameron himself made such sentiments as clear as was possible after a year of his premiership, re-affirming his commitment that *“We will not cut spending on the NHS, we will increase it”*<sup>607</sup>. Within this context, this modern expression of social Conservatism and its focus on maintaining constructive government investment into a core public service has appeared somewhat inconsistent and incoherent in the light of the party’s high-profile focus and rhetoric on deficit reduction, and this has left the policy’s intellectual and philosophical basis open to criticism. In practical terms, such ambitious spending pledges have subsequently become vulnerable to significant scrutiny, particularly given media claims that

<sup>605</sup> Rob Baggott, ‘Conservative health policy: change, continuity and policy influence’, in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.5, p.83

<sup>606</sup> David Cameron, Speech: ‘Protecting the NHS for Tomorrow’, Tuesday 7th June 2011, [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/06/David\\_Cameron\\_Protecting\\_the\\_NHS\\_for\\_tomorrow.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/06/David_Cameron_Protecting_the_NHS_for_tomorrow.aspx)

<sup>607</sup> Ibid.

NHS spending was actually cut in real terms by £25 million in the financial year 2011-12 when inflation is taken into account<sup>608</sup>, leading to one academic observation that *‘the NHS is not immune’*<sup>609</sup> from the era of austerity that has prevailed since the Conservatives returned to national office in 2010.

Despite this pro-investment rhetoric being such a prominent feature of NHS policy-making under the Cameron leadership since 2005, some on the right of the Conservative Party have lamented the party’s perceived capitulation to the New Labour agenda and have challenged the apparent consensus that relatively high levels of public spending automatically equates to an improved level of service. This was evident in the broad thrust of the televised comments made by the MEP Daniel Hannan in 2009, and such sentiments were at least acknowledged at a senior level in comments made by Health Secretary Andrew Lansley, who in 2010 remarked in a high-profile TV interview that *“Britain now spends European quantities of money (on the NHS) without achieving European standards of treatment”*<sup>610</sup>, which was a strong re-emphasis of a recurring Conservative criticism that Labour’s NHS investment after 1997 had failed to reach frontline services due to alleged bureaucratic obstructions. This viewpoint has arguably shaped the Conservative critical narrative of the centralised and statist approach of Labour over thirteen years in power, and which influenced Cameron’s emphasis that the party’s post-2010 NHS programme had to be accompanied by a long-term outlook entailing a programme of proposed reforms which he argued seek to *“modernize the NHS - because changing the NHS today is the only way to protect the NHS for tomorrow”*<sup>611</sup>. Such comments emphasise that Cameron’s brand of social Conservatism aspires to create a more streamlined, diverse and efficient state structure that can deliver a modernised health service while always being

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<sup>608</sup> Rosa Prince, ‘David Cameron accused of breaking pledge as NHS spending falls again’, Daily Telegraph, 6th July 2012,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/9381598/David-Cameron-accused-of-breaking-pledge-as-NHS-spending-falls-again.html>

<sup>609</sup> Steve Corbett and Alan Walker, ‘The Big Society: Back to the Future’, *The Political Quarterly*, Volume 3, Issue 3, (July-September 2012), p.490

<sup>610</sup> Andrew Lansley, The Andrew Marr Show, BBC TV, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2010, cited in Conservative Home website, <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thinktankcentral/2010/07/civitas-warns-against-lansleys-nhs-reorganisation-plans.html>

<sup>611</sup> David Cameron, Speech: ‘Protecting the NHS for Tomorrow’, Tuesday 7th June 2011, [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/06/David\\_Cameron\\_Protecting\\_the\\_NHS\\_for\\_tomorrow.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/06/David_Cameron_Protecting_the_NHS_for_tomorrow.aspx)

aware of the rising and arguably unsustainable financial costs<sup>612</sup>, which appears to indicate that enhanced financial investment alone is not the Conservative Party's answer to ensuring a viable and effective NHS in the long-term.

This emphasis on greater economic and organisational efficiency can be aligned to the fact that since 2010 the government has been operating under the cloak of a severe austerity agenda that has sought to unerringly drive down the national deficit and to achieve better value for money in the process, and this has been a central dimension of post-2010 government's *raison d'être*, which was identified by the Conservatives in particular as a fundamental issue during the 2010 General Election campaign and in subsequent coalition negotiations<sup>613</sup>. As an integral and high-profile theme that appeared to derive from the heart of government and which sought to control and direct the coalition government's overall policy agenda, the focus on deficit reduction was consistent with the Big Society's alternative model of a more streamlined and less bureaucratic structure of public service delivery, and which aspired towards '*a significant reshaping of public services..... empowering front-line staff and allowing them to get on with the job*'<sup>614</sup> in an ostensibly more creative, cost-effective and autonomous manner and with a clear reduction in centralised state control, perhaps symbolised by the scheduled abolition of primary care trusts (PCTs) by 2013. Within such a socio-economic context, the incoming government's approach to NHS policy could be summarised in practical terms as seeking to make a significant commitment to sustained financial investment alongside a long-term organisational reform that was focused on managing and controlling the overall bureaucratic costs and structural size of this expensive public service. However a key challenge that would be created by this approach would be to keep a potentially sceptical and suspicious public opinion on board, alongside the large 'client state' attached to the

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<sup>612</sup> David Cameron, Speech: '*Protecting the NHS for Tomorrow*', Tuesday 7th June 2011, [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/06/David\\_Cameron\\_Protecting\\_the\\_NHS\\_for\\_tomorrows.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/06/David_Cameron_Protecting_the_NHS_for_tomorrows.aspx)

This was evident in Cameron's claim that over the past two decades spending on the NHS: "*more than doubled in real terms from £38bn to £103bn*".

<sup>613</sup> 'In his statement of 7<sup>th</sup> May (2010), David Cameron said "No Government will be in the national interest unless it deals with the biggest threat to our national interest- and that is the deficit"', cited in David Laws, *22 Days in May: The Birth of the Lib-Dem Conservative Coalition*, (Biteback, London, 2010), Appendix 1, p.287.

<sup>614</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.12, p.216

service, namely the trade unions and the almost two million NHS employees, all of whom are voters at election time.

In its role as the senior partners of the coalition, the Conservative Party leadership has approached NHS policy since 2010 with an acute awareness of its responsibility for the management of the service in the short-term, along with the associated sensitivities of re-assuring the public in relation to the service's future viability given the party's somewhat negative image of the past in relation to this public service. Within this context, Cameron's Conservatives have also had to acknowledge the growing socio-economic pressures on the service, and as a result have ambitiously sought to steer NHS policy direction towards targeting the public organisation's considerable and escalating long-term structural costs as part of the overall focus on deficit reduction, with such costs particularly fuelled in the long-term by the demographic trends of a growing and ageing population. Figures in support of this analysis include a 61% projected increase in those aged over 65 in the UK by 2032, as well as the increased average life expectancy in the UK being a substantial thirty years over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>615</sup>. In many ways such demographic variants have been a clear indicator of the NHS's post-war success in how it has considerably prolonged average life expectancy via the promotion of *'improvements in health, diet and preventative care'*<sup>616</sup>, but with this have come significant financial costs relating to NHS infrastructure and service viability in the long-term. This trend in the UK's demographics has been particularly identified as a specific cause of *'the inexorable growth of welfare spending'*<sup>617</sup> and the ongoing extension of social rights in the post-war era, and such trends have provided an escalating and evolving challenge to most governments of this historical period. While the incoming government from 2010 ultimately appears to have been focused on achieving improved levels of service and performance within the NHS, it remains a valid issue to consider as to whether NHS policy is ultimately both shaped and hampered by the considerable structural and economic constraints unerringly linked to the UK's long-term

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<sup>615</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges website, *'Britain's Ageing Population'*,  
<http://www.21stcenturychallenges.org/60-seconds/britains-ageing-population/>

See also Office for National Statistics (2008):

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/hub/index.html>

<sup>616</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges website, *'Britain's Ageing Population'*,  
<http://www.21stcenturychallenges.org/60-seconds/britains-ageing-population/>

<sup>617</sup> Brian Salter, *The Politics of Change in the Health Service*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1998), Introduction, Ch.1, p.14

and significant demographic changes, and this can subsequently erode and undermine government policy intentions from the outset.

Such a scenario strikes at potentially conflicting Conservative motives for NHS policy-making, and in tackling this demographic reality the party's primary focus is on enhancing the provision and quality of service within the NHS by a combination of financial investment alongside a simultaneous programme of organisational reforms in order to ensure improved value for money for the taxpayers and the guarantee of a quality public service in the long-term. The Conservative Party's contemporary focus on providing enhanced levels of choice within the service are ostensibly fuelled by the post-2010 government's desire to utilise a greater range and diversity of proposed healthcare providers, and alongside this development is a programme of structural reform as a further means of achieving an improved service in practical terms. These rival demands of simultaneous investment, reform, retrenchment and eventual service delivery have subsequently created a somewhat inconsistent momentum at the heart of this specific aspect of the social policy agenda of modern Conservatism, featuring a fusion of conflicting pressures and tensions which make a clear and coherent policy direction a major challenge and difficult to predict in terms of planning, implementation and eventual outcome. This somewhat multi-faceted approach could possibly be viewed as an effective political strategy that would re-enforce a key aspect of the party's traditional political identity and play to some traditional strengths, primarily in terms of the Conservatives being perceived as being flexible and pragmatic, financially prudent, in control of public spending and social policy innovators all at the same time.

However on a more radical and innovative level, the party's contemporary NHS agenda has aimed to instil a modern and contemporary variant of Conservatism into the policy mix, namely by promoting it as a core emphasis of the government's 'Big Society' narrative, focusing on overseeing the creation of a dynamic type of social policy within a decentralised and more localised policy-making model. In adopting this approach, the new government has particularly sought to distinguish itself in a positive manner from the allegedly profligate fiscal tendencies and bureaucratic, centralising instincts in relation to public policy-making that were increasingly associated with the previous Labour regime. The ultimate outcome has seen the emergence of a scenario where the coalition government's



commitment to maintain healthy levels of investment in such a key public service on the one hand, while simultaneously attempting to radically restructure and re-shape it has appeared on the political horizon as an extremely challenging balancing act to fulfil. Attempts to significantly reform the NHS was a major challenge faced by the Thatcher government in the 1980s, and even during the New Labour period there were difficulties in re-organising the service while also investing in it, particularly due to Labour's close links to the public sector trade unions and the resistance this movement generally expressed towards public service reform. Such historic parallels suggest that similar proposed reforms from 2010 onwards were always likely to be laden with a series of significant political and economic difficulties.

Within this increasingly expensive broader policy arena of wider welfare provision and within it the specific aspect of health policy, the fundamental focus on streamlining costs and bureaucracy have encapsulated many Conservative criticisms of the previous Labour government in relation to this issue<sup>618</sup>. However whether such a reduction in bureaucracy and overall cost is practically possible within a credible social policy agenda that seeks to guarantee the maintenance of established levels of service within an ageing society is open to question, particularly within the added aspiration of a more devolved organisational structure and localised service delivery. This complex challenge of governance has been particularly evident in the context of developments such as the global economic crisis since 2008 and the subsequent additions to social and welfare policy expenditure caused by rising levels of unemployment, and such socio-economic crises have historically required the need for a strong centralised state to co-ordinate an appropriate response, a factor which subsequently appears to undermine the coalition government's localist agenda. It is therefore a fundamental question as to whether Cameron's administration has both the political desire and practical ability to be 'radical' enough to achieve its explicit aims in this area of social policy, namely to achieve significant retrenchment in expenditure while at the same time seeking to create a more decentralised health service structure in line with traditional Conservative principles of freedom and

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<sup>618</sup>Laura Donnelly, 'Spending on NHS bureaucracy up 50 per cent', Daily Telegraph, 26<sup>th</sup> December 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/6890335/Spending-on-NHS-bureaucracy-up-50-per-cent.html>

marketisation, without damaging the broader fabric of British society and de-stabilising this key public policy in the process.

Linked to such socio-economic influences and structural organisational pressures, there have also been moral imperatives behind this policy approach and its ultimate focus on creating a more efficient public service while simultaneously reducing bureaucracy and the national debt. The Cameron-led administration has therefore sought to infuse a greater sense of Conservative—orientated social justice into British politics and society in the process, whereby a less centralised state structure exists to provide a regulatory framework for public service delivery, but which in practical terms entails that the state is ultimately less active and interventionist in such policy provision and the individual has greater personal responsibility and is therefore less directly reliant on the state for support. Under this idealised vision of modern Conservatism, citizens are therefore encouraged to utilise a model of public service provision that delivers enhanced levels of choice, personal responsibility and opportunities within a more independent and autonomous framework, operating within a broader political structure that features a more diverse range of service providers and which should ideally feature a slimmer state that is more appropriate for such desired levels of personal autonomy to flourish. Within this context, choice is to be viewed as a positive means of enhancing the service, not eroding it, with the Prime Minister affirming that *“We will ensure competition benefits patients”*<sup>619</sup>. Some Conservatives and right-of-centre commentators have embraced this perspective of enhanced choice and individuality within the service and developed it to a further dimension, making it the basis for arguing, in a somewhat neo-Conservative and morally-infused position, that a logical conclusion of this approach is to question the universal ethos of NHS provision and to favour the utilisation of specific NHS services only for those that ‘deserve’ them, and that a form of rationing should entail as a result. Such an argument that seeks to instil a morality-based conditionality has concluded that aspects of NHS provision should be withdrawn for people who don’t take care or personal responsibility of their own health due to smoking or poor

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<sup>619</sup> David Cameron, Speech: *‘Protecting the NHS for Tomorrow’*, Tuesday 7th June 2011, [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/06/David\\_Cameron\\_Protecting\\_the\\_NHS\\_for\\_tomorrow.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/06/David_Cameron_Protecting_the_NHS_for_tomorrow.aspx)

diet<sup>620</sup>, but the party leadership have not offered public support or been willing to formally embrace this position.

Cameron's approach to the formulation of NHS policy has also come under pressure from a variety of right-of-centre think tanks such as the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) and the Social Market Foundation (SMF)<sup>621</sup>, who in a similar vein to the educational sphere, have sought to influence and shape government health policy within a pluralistic 'Big Society' framework. While such groups have broadly sought to steer this area of policy towards a broadly more individualised, marketised and streamlined organisational direction, the CSJ in particular, with its particular emphasis on social justice, has also re-enforced a sense of moral pressure in stressing the importance of enhanced self-help and autonomy within public healthcare as a means of improving an individual's self-worth and value within society. Cameron therefore has had to balance the somewhat incongruous pre-election promises of enhanced levels of investment in the health service alongside the achievement of national deficit reduction, as well as reacting to the realities of coalition politics and external think-tank and pressure group activity in framing NHS policy after 2010. The challenging issue of re-shaping and restructuring the pivotal public service of the NHS therefore provided a number of variables to the largest party within the coalition government, ultimately offering the potential for the Conservatives to fulfil their expressed commitment to the devolution and de-bureaucratization of public policy-making. However even the trailblazing and more ideologically assertive Conservative administration of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s struggled to deal with the fundamental issues relating to the management of the costs and overall size of the wider and extensive welfare state, for the principal reason that *'it affects the lives of so many people'*<sup>622</sup>.

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<sup>620</sup> Cristina Odone, 'Why should fat people take precedence over the elderly in the NHS?', The Daily Telegraph, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2012,

<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/cristinaodone/100146838/why-should-fat-people-take-precedence-over-the-elderly-in-the-nhs/>

See also Jason Groves, 'People who eat doughnuts for breakfast should be charged for prescriptions, says Tory MP', Daily Mail, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2012,

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2238780/People-eat-doughnuts-breakfast-charged-prescriptions-says-Tory-MP.html>

<sup>621</sup> Cited in Rob Baggott, 'Conservative health policy: change, continuity and policy influence', in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.5, p.90

<sup>622</sup> Stephen McKay and Karen Rowlingson, 'Social security and welfare reform', cited in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.8, p.145

## The NHS and The Big Society

This key social policy area was therefore identified as a principal dimension of governance that would allow both traditional Conservative principles and innovative new ideas to be dually imposed as part of the party's new social agenda from 2010 onwards, while in the process promoting more efficient use of taxpayers' money and offering further enlightenment as to how such policies correlated and aligned themselves with the overall socio-political architecture of The Big Society with its focus on greater 'localism', enhanced social responsibility and a re-modelled state. Advocates of the Big Society agenda have subsequently proclaimed that when its principles are attached to specific areas of social policy such as the NHS, its approach to governance is '*pragmatic and non-ideological in character..... (providing) more freedom to innovate..... and more freedom to act in accordance with simple common sense*'<sup>623</sup>. Such an apparently practical political approach to the delivery of key public services would therefore suggest that pragmatism and 'statecraft' has been prevalent over ideological dogma in such contemporary social policy-making, and such a practical political nature is consistent with a label that has been attached to Cameron by observers and biographers<sup>624</sup>. However as a counter to this viewpoint, critics from both the political and medical world have claimed that the proposed NHS reforms of the Cameron government are tainted by explicit ideological tendencies that clearly and deliberately advocate a smaller state which seeks to make greater use of what Conservative supporters perceive to be a more efficient private sector<sup>625</sup> to offer a better balance to the state's previously hegemonic influence in public service delivery, and it is such an organisational model that has been broadly espoused by supporters of the contemporary post-2010 NHS reforms.

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<sup>623</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.10, p.193

<sup>624</sup> Francis Elliott and James Hanning, *Cameron: Practically a Conservative*, (Fourth Estate, London, 2012)

<sup>625</sup> Owen Bowcott, '*Cameron is trying to set out a clear ideological path on the NHS*', Joe Public Blog, The Guardian, Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> January 2010,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/joepublic/2010/jan/05/conservative-nhs-draft-manifesto>

See also Des Spence, '*Flawed ideology drives the NHS reforms*', *British Medical Journal*, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2011, <http://www.bmj.com/content/342/bmj.d3076>

The government's overall focus on deficit reduction, eliminating excess bureaucracy and streamlining the functionality of key public services since 2010 has subsequently generated controversial policies and proposed reforms to the existing health service structure<sup>626</sup>, with a particular emphasis on seeking to liberate the service from what is perceived to be an overbearing and bureaucratic central state. Advocates of the Big Society agenda have therefore argued that a standardised national health service, rigidly controlled from the centre of government, as has been the prevailing tendency since its creation in 1948, does not necessarily provide a better quality or more efficient service:

*'Nobody wants a patchy health service, but the point is that we already have a patchy health service, we already have a health service that is delivering massive inequality, we already have a world where some people live thirty years longer than someone else'.<sup>627</sup>*

In the sphere of health policy (as in other policy areas since 2010), the principles of The Big Society have therefore been fused with the austerity agenda, and this combined pressure has led to an enhanced focus of the market ethos and the generation of *'greater competition into the NHS'*<sup>628</sup>, which in many ways has echoed the debate of the 1980s in relation to this policy issue. In this sense there has appeared to be some degree of history repeating itself in relation to the policy trends of the 1980s, with Labour leading the objections to such policy reforms from opposition, and many health professions joining the chorus of disapproval, with key groups such as the BMA excluded from government-organised summits to discuss the proposed NHS policy changes after 2010<sup>629</sup>. The pursuit of

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<sup>626</sup> White Paper on the NHS (2010): *Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS*, 12<sup>th</sup> July 2010, [http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_117353](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_117353)

<sup>627</sup> Phillip Blond, Respublica think-tank, interview with author, 19<sup>th</sup> February 2013

See also The Francis Report- the Public Inquiry into the Mid-Staffordshire Foundation Trust, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2013. This report was established by then Health Secretary Andrew Lansley in June 2010 in response to the volume of complaints regarding alleged sustained failures of care within this specific NHS trust. The Francis Report reached some damning conclusions about how this part of the NHS was run, and made 290 suggested improvements:

<http://www.midstaffpublicinquiry.com/report>

<sup>628</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.11, p.198

<sup>629</sup> Helene Mulholland and Patrick Wintour, *'Pressure mounts on Cameron over NHS summit'*, The Guardian, 20<sup>th</sup> February 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2012/feb/20/pressure-mounts-cameron-nhs-summit>

such policies has suggested that the Conservatives possibly have some unfinished business in this socio-political sphere from their last sustained spell in government between 1979 and 1997, despite the fact that New Labour embraced private involvement and funding within the NHS while in office between 1997 and 2010. However New Labour's utilisation of private sector involvement was not to such a radical or extensive extent as the coalition government proposes, with the potential limit on private patients in the NHS rising from a 2% maximum imposed by Labour in 2003, up to a 49% maximum to be obtained by private funds as outlined in the 2012 Health and Social Care Bill<sup>630</sup>. This scenario has therefore seen the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition encouraging and indeed legislating for non-state providers and private companies to have access to a bigger share of the NHS and provide specific health and broader welfare services that have traditionally been under the remit of the state. In adopting this approach the Conservative-led government has sought to expand the opportunities for the private sector in order to diversify provision in the name of enhanced value, reduced administrative bureaucracy, greater choice and a more diverse public service, as has also been the case with education policy.

This variable fusion of pressures and influences of an economic, social, moral and political nature has meant that such proposed NHS reform, featuring an organisation that is complex, extensive and entrenched, has been an integral aspect of the revamped Conservative social policy focus since the party regained national office in 2010, and it has absorbed significant amounts of government time in the process. The Conservative-led government's 'Big Society' approach to the health service has subsequently witnessed some core principles of the post-1948 NHS and its 'universal' provision coming under significant scrutiny and revision from private, non-state elements, and this outlook has been fuelled by economics, demographics and communitarianism in particular. In pursuing a policy approach that promises investment alongside organisational reforms and restructuring, the Cameron government has adopted what can be argued is a flexible and pragmatic premise which embraces the mantra that it is *'a perfectly reasonable question to ask whether you would get better public services by employing other organisations than merely the*

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<sup>630</sup> Helen Briggs, Health editor, 'Planned 49% limit' for NHS private patients in England', BBC News website, 27<sup>th</sup> December 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-16337904>

*instruments of the state*<sup>631</sup>. This in itself has proved to be a major gamble for Cameron's government, and given that such reforms have associations with neo-liberalism and privatisation, he has duly re-kindled connotations of the Thatcherite ideology and its impact on the NHS during the 1980s, which significant swathes of voters have viewed as being negative. This has risked 'retoxifying'<sup>632</sup> the party's precious brand and image in this 'compassionate' sphere of policy-making, in spite of Cameron's extensive efforts to achieve the opposite outcome.

### **The influences, aims and intellectual basis of Conservative NHS Policy since 2010**

As Michael Gove has been the prominent figurehead for Conservative educational reforms after 2010, Andrew Lansley took on a parallel role in relation to health policy until he left the post following a Cabinet reshuffle in September 2012, to be replaced by Jeremy Hunt. Lansley had been one of the longest-established Conservative politicians in their particular policy role, having held the Shadow Health position since 2004, and therefore preceding Cameron's accession to the party leadership in late 2005. During this time he subsequently built up a considerable depth of knowledge in relation to this policy portfolio, and Cameron appears to have deferred to such policy experience by keeping him in the same position for such a sustained period of time. Given such a substantial degree of pedigree in this particular sphere of social policy, Lansley will have been influential in shaping the commitment made by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in May 2010 that as far as NHS policy was concerned, the new government would seek to *'free NHS staff from political micromanagement..... (and) stop the top-down reorganisations of the NHS'*<sup>633</sup>. This pledge was a high-profile one and sought to epitomise the apparently distinctive approach of the new government from 2010, with its emphasis on patient empowerment and the liberation of the broader NHS as an organisational structure with reduced levels of bureaucracy. However in relation to the aims and influences of NHS policy-making since 2010, it has been the source of much political debate in the months and years that have

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<sup>631</sup> Jesse Norman, MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire, interview with author, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

<sup>632</sup> Denis Campbell and Daniel Boffey, *'Tories fear row over health bill may 'retoxify' party on NHS'*, The Observer, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2012,

[http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2012/feb/12/nhs-bill-toxic-conservatives-lansley?CMP=twg\\_gu](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2012/feb/12/nhs-bill-toxic-conservatives-lansley?CMP=twg_gu)

<sup>633</sup> See *'The Coalition: our programme for government'* (May 2010), p.24

[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/coalition\\_programme\\_for\\_government.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf)

followed as to whether the Conservatives have adhered to this specific aspect of the coalition agreement and its emphasis on greater devolution and autonomy within the service, as opposed to significant organisational restructuring imposed from above.

Such top-down re-organisations were identified as negatively prominent features of NHS policy-making that were associated with the previous Labour administration, and they were deemed as being undesirable from a Conservative perspective for the principal reason that they were highlighted as an apparent cause of generating increased levels of organisational bureaucracy. Within this context, from an early stage of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's existence, reducing the levels of bureaucracy was identified as a key priority in terms of addressing a structural aspect of the NHS monolith that Labour's thirteen years in office had failed to address, despite rhetoric to the contrary. An early specific target that was identified for bureaucratic cutbacks was the need to achieve a minimum of £20 billion in spending cuts over 3-4 years, as highlighted by the NHS Chief Executive Sir David Nicholson in 2009 during the final phase of Labour's period in government<sup>634</sup>. Achieving 4% spending cuts within the NHS for four successive years alongside the development of greater levels of integrated health care were therefore seen to be specific and essential elements of this cost-cutting and more prudent agenda, and this approach has been broadly endorsed by the Commons Health Select Committee from 2010 onwards, chaired by former Health Secretary Stephen Dorrell (1995-97). This financial target was subsequently dubbed the '*Nicholson challenge*', but in the short-term at least the government has initially failed to meet such a challenging target aimed at reducing the bureaucratic costs in the health service according to National Audit Office estimates in 2011-12<sup>635</sup>, and such an upward public expenditure trend appears to have undermined its overall health policy agenda from an early stage of its time in national office.

Within this broader context of seeking to control the long-term upward spiral of cost and bureaucracy within the NHS during the post-war era, spending on the service has

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<sup>634</sup> James Ball and Patrick Sawyer, '*NHS chief tells trusts to make £20bn savings*', The Daily Telegraph, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/5524693/NHS-chief-tells-trusts-to-make-20bn-savings.html#>

<sup>635</sup> See House of Commons Health Committee, Public Expenditure, Thirteenth Report of Session 2010-12, Volume 2, Additional Written Evidence, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2012, p.35

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmhealth/1499/1499vw.pdf>



increased by ten times its original level in real terms since 1948<sup>636</sup>, although this has been generally in line with most other developed nations also. However since 2010, specific and clear attempts have been made to steer policy formulation in a more explicitly Conservative-orientated direction, with a greater focus on traditional principles such as improved patient choice, enhanced levels of devolution of responsibilities to GPs and medical professionals (more clinical leadership), alongside greater accountability and the attempted elimination of superfluous organisational structures. This has been bolstered by a background political narrative of de-bureaucratization and tougher fiscal guidelines for government expenditure on the service, and despite Cameron's post-2010 claims to have ring-fenced NHS spending<sup>637</sup>, some critical voices have declared that the practical implications of this approach amidst cuts in overall government expenditure are that NHS spending levels (in real terms) could steadily slip below the Thatcher period of the 1980s. This is due to the developing scenario that despite the NHS facing less savage cutbacks than other departments in the post-2010 austerity drive, the health department's budget is set to rise by just 0.1% annually until 2014, compared to a 4.5% annual average for most of the service's lifetime since 1948<sup>638</sup>. Such challenging spending levels have been put into a stark historical context by NHS Chief Executive Sir David Nicholson, who has stated that proposed spending levels on the service after 2010 are *"generous when you look across the rest of the public service. [But] there has never been a time where we have had four years of flat real growth. It is unprecedented"*<sup>639</sup>.

Such an 'unprecedented' background context within this new NHS agenda has generated renewed fears of 'rationing' within the service among political opponents, raising question marks against the Conservative Party's pre-election commitment to the NHS, but such fears will be able to be more accurately assessed by the end of the 2010-15 Parliament.

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<sup>636</sup> BBC News website, 'The Riddle of the NHS Budget', 8<sup>th</sup> November 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-11686396>

<sup>637</sup> Jonathan Moore and Alex Stevenson, 'Emergency Budget: Only NHS and international aid ringfenced', Politicos.co.uk, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2010, <http://www.politics.co.uk/news/2010/6/22/emergency-budget-only-nhs-and-international-a>

<sup>638</sup> Nick Triggle, Health Reporter, BBC News, 'Why the NHS must face up to the new world', BBC News website, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-12566719>

<sup>639</sup> Sir David Nicholson, NHS Chief Executive, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2011, cited in BBC News, 'Why the NHS must face up to the new world', BBC News website, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-12566719>

The culmination of NHS policy in the early years of the coalition government was the high-profile Health and Social Care Act (2012),<sup>640</sup> which the then Secretary of State for Health, Andrew Lansley, praised as being:

*'part of a broader vision of health and health services in this country being among the best in the world..... a service where national standards and funding secure a high-quality, comprehensive service available to all, based on need and not the ability to pay; and where the power to deliver is in the hands of local doctors, nurses, health professionals and local communities'*<sup>641</sup>.

In its fundamental shake-up and restructuring of the NHS, this Act has been widely criticised by many on the left-of-centre of British politics, primarily due to its apparent contradiction of repeated coalition pledges not to engage in a top-down reorganisation of the health service and many of its long-standing institutional elements. Its implications have indeed entailed some significant restructuring of this core public service with an enhanced focus on instilling greater competition via a wider range of NHS service providers<sup>642</sup>, and as junior coalition partners the Liberal Democrats have been sceptical but have been gradually persuaded to support the general thrust of such reforms. However there have been internal tensions and divisions within the party amid claims that the NHS was being privatised in all but name by such policy measures, with Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg offering reassurances that *"If I felt it was privatising the NHS or tearing it limb from limb, it would never have seen the light of day."*<sup>643</sup>

This policy proposal endured a prolonged and controversial passage through Parliament in 2011-12, with significant amendments and concessions secured by Liberal

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<sup>640</sup> Health and Social Care Act (2012),  
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/7/contents/enacted>

<sup>641</sup> Andrew Lansley MP, House of Commons (Hansard), 4<sup>th</sup> April 2011, Column 767,  
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110404/debtext/110404-0002.htm>

<sup>642</sup> Andrew Lansley, 'Competition is critical for NHS reform', *Health Service Journal*, 13<sup>th</sup> February 2012,  
<http://www.hsj.co.uk/opinion/columnists/andrew-lansley-competition-is-critical-for-nhs-reform/5041288.article>

<sup>643</sup> Nick Clegg, speech to Liberal Democrat Spring Conference, Gateshead, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2012, cited in BBC News website, 'Lib Dems: Party activists reject holding NHS protest vote', 10<sup>th</sup> March 2012,  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-17323504>

Democrat peers in the House of Lords in particular, primarily in relation to the nature of the proposed devolution of powers and financial decision-making to GPs, alongside the scale and range of external private healthcare providers that suggested the resurrection of a more full-blown ‘choice’ agenda<sup>644</sup>. In this sense it can perhaps be argued that as in educational policy, the Liberal Democrats have acted as some form of braking mechanism on the more ideological tendencies within the Conservative Party, although Andrew Lansley has been keen to further underplay the ideological implications of the policy and that *‘choice, competition and the involvement of the private sector should only ever be a means to improve services for patients, not ends in themselves’*<sup>645</sup>. The Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister have also sought to align such health reforms with their broader attitude to public service provision, namely that:

*“a new approach to delivering public services is urgently needed. The principles that inform our approach, and the policies we will enact to give it force, signal a decisive end to the old-fashioned, top-down, take-what-you-are-given model of public services. We are opening public services because we believe that giving people more control over the public services they receive, and opening up the delivery of those services to new providers, will lead to better public services for all”*<sup>646</sup>.

However one high-profile media critic has still claimed that the thrust of the reforms are aligned not with practical necessity or the mood of ‘The Big Society’ as the above quote suggests, but instead with an inherent market ideology with links to the neo-liberal agenda of the 1980s, and which therefore have the negative potential to *‘finish the Health Service- and David Cameron’*<sup>647</sup>. This implies a potentially adverse political consequence for the Prime Minister in his pursuit of such NHS reforms, which was perhaps an explanatory factor

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<sup>644</sup> See Baroness Shirley Williams, ‘Our NHS bill amendments represent a major concession by the government’, Comment is Free, The Guardian, Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/feb/03/nhs-bill-amendments-major-concession>

<sup>645</sup> Andrew Lansley MP, House of Commons (Hansard), 4<sup>th</sup> April 2011, Column 767, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110404/debtext/110404-0002.htm>

<sup>646</sup> The Cabinet Office, ‘Open Public Service White Paper’, (2011-12), p.6 <http://www.openpublicservices.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/>

<sup>647</sup> Polly Toynbee, ‘The NHS Bill could finish the Health Service- and David Cameron’, Comment is Free, The Guardian, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/feb/06/nhs-bill-finish-cameron-ideology>

in Andrew Lansley's sideways move from the Department of Health in autumn 2012, amid media suggestions that he was bearing the brunt of criticism of the post-2010 NHS reforms<sup>648</sup>. Such a negative fall-out from the policy has resurrected images of re-toxification of the Conservative image in the process, a bleak prospect for a Prime Minister who in restructuring this core public service has sought to re-define his party's reputation in relation to it.

A central influence behind Cameron's NHS policy has therefore been the concerted efforts to drive down and eradicate the extent of government bureaucracy, a fundamental theme of the post-2010 Big Society agenda. Within such a context, there has been a particularly ironic aspect of the government's specific programme for NHS reform, and this has been fuelled by the Labour opposition's claims in 2012 that despite this much-publicised focus on reducing the hegemonic role of the state in NHS provision, the practical implications of post-2010 NHS policy are that there has actually been more structural bureaucracy created within this area of social policy<sup>649</sup>, not less as the Conservatives had aspired to achieve (see diagrams one and two). David Cameron has made this aspiration for NHS governance very clear with recurring comments such as *"We're wasting too much money on empty bureaucracy when it could be spent on the frontline"*<sup>650</sup>, yet despite such rhetoric, the warnings of bureaucratic growth have been re-emphasised from more unlikely quarters, with the right-of-centre and libertarian think-tank Civitas expressing similar comments in 2010 of the potential creation of additional organisational bureaucracy caused by government proposals to transfer NHS purchasing power to GPs, supposedly to save costs. Civitas argued that the outcome of this proposal could be counter-productive, primarily due to the NHS *'facing the most difficult financial times in its history (and) now is*

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<sup>648</sup> Max Pemberton, 'I wanted Andrew Lansley to face up to the mess he's made', Daily Telegraph, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/9530389/I-wanted-Andrew-Lansley-to-face-up-to-the-mess-hes-made.html>

<sup>649</sup> Nick Bostock, 'How NHS reforms are increasing bureaucracy', GP Online, 5<sup>th</sup> August 2011,

<http://www.gponline.com/News/article/1083701/NHS-reforms-increasing-bureaucracy/>

See also:

<http://offlinehbpl.hbpl.co.uk/NewsAttachments/PG/Previous%20NHS%20structure.pdf>

<http://offlinehbpl.hbpl.co.uk/NewsAttachments/PG/new%20NHS%20bureaucracy.pdf>

<sup>650</sup> David Cameron, Speech: 'Protecting the NHS for Tomorrow', Tuesday 7th June 2011,

[http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/06/David\\_Cameron\\_Protecting\\_the\\_NHS\\_for\\_tomorrow.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/06/David_Cameron_Protecting_the_NHS_for_tomorrow.aspx)

*not the time for ripping up internal structures yet again on scant evidence base*<sup>651</sup>, with the contradictory consequence that such organisational reform has created another structural layer in the process, as instigated by the 2012 Health and Social Care Act.

Such arguments appear to fundamentally undermine one of the prime influences behind the flagship Health and Social Care Bill's introduction, and this specific criticism ultimately suggests that the new NHS policy approach since 2010 has indeed instigated a top-down organisational re-structure despite coalition government promises to the contrary, and this has unerringly brought its own distinct layer of associated bureaucracy and 'red-tape' that will potentially be difficult to eliminate in the long-term. This is further evidence to vindicate the Max Weber analysis<sup>652</sup> from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a viewpoint that argues that society becomes more bureaucratized the more complex and advanced that it becomes, regardless of government attempts to stem the bureaucratic tide. This view has been concisely summed up, bolstered by the identification of some specific contemporary problems, by one political commentator as follows:

*'Taking the development of local empowerment seriously could involve massive expenditure to set up the necessary infrastructures, and that may not be possible in the aftermath of the world financial crisis'*<sup>653</sup>.

A similar charge has been laid against the free schools agenda within the educational sphere, namely that any significant structural re-organization within such a key public service always carries with it its own bureaucratic and financial baggage in addition to existing structures, with entrenched and existing organisational layers difficult to eliminate entirely and new ones often more complex than initially envisaged. Within this context

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<sup>651</sup> James Gubb, Director of the Health Unit, Civitas, cited in Conservative Home website, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2010, *'Civitas warns against Lansley's NHS reorganisation plans'*, <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thinktankcentral/2010/07/civitas-warns-against-lansleys-nhs-reorganisation-plans.html>

see also:

Civitas Data Briefing, Re Government Plans to transfer Commissioning Responsibility From PCTs to GPs, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2010,

[http://www.civitas.org.uk/nhs/download/civitas\\_data\\_briefing\\_gpcommissioning.pdf](http://www.civitas.org.uk/nhs/download/civitas_data_briefing_gpcommissioning.pdf)

<sup>652</sup> See Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, (Germany, 1922)

<sup>653</sup> Alan Ware, *'The Big Society and Conservative Politics'*, cited in Jason Edwards (ed). *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012), p.87

therefore, and despite Conservative pledges to the contrary prior to 2010, it can be argued that top-down bureaucracy is very difficult to control and eliminate within a vast and complex public service such as the NHS, for the principal reason that the practical running of the organisation is heavily influenced by political pressures to ensure adequate service delivery, as well as being *'a taxation-based economic system (which)..... will always to an extent have to be managed in a top-down manner'*<sup>654</sup>, and this in turn creates further bureaucracy. As the above quote suggests, such pressures on the NHS have been exacerbated by the global financial crisis from 2008 onwards, which appears to have put further strains on the funding and management of this key public service.

Such explicit aims and influences that focus on the need for greater organisational efficiency and improved levels of performance have brought difficult practical implications with them, as recent figures have indicated the lowest recorded health satisfaction surveys for thirty years<sup>655</sup>, with a 12% drop in public support between 2010 and 2011. This has prompted critics to make a link between the contemporary direction and focus of the NHS policy agenda since 2010 and a steadily worsening service that is likely to come under further strain due to the impact of the government's reforms and ongoing austerity agenda. Prime Minister Cameron has expressed his awareness of the rising levels of political and public opposition and criticism to his NHS reforms and has declared a willingness to *"take a hit"* (at least in the short-term) from the wider public over the issue, adding that the reforms were those of a *"brave government"* and offering reassurance that the NHS was *"in the party's DNA and that's not going to change"*<sup>656</sup>. Those of a supportive outlook to the reforms have argued that after the Health and Social Care Bill formally became law in Spring 2012, the new policy needs to be given appropriate time to prove its worth and fulfil the government's claims that the reforms will improve the service, particularly in the light of significant amendments in the House of Lords to ostensibly enhance the policy proposals

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<sup>654</sup> Brian Salter, *The Politics of Change in the Health Service*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1998), Introduction, Ch.1, p.11

<sup>655</sup> The Kings Fund, *'Public satisfaction with the NHS and its services'*, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2012, [http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/current\\_projects/bsa\\_survey\\_results\\_2011/index.html](http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/current_projects/bsa_survey_results_2011/index.html)

<sup>656</sup> David Cameron, speech to Conservative Party Spring Forum, London, Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2012, cited in The Guardian, *'David Cameron "prepared to take hit" on the NHS'*, Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2012/mar/03/david-cameron-nhs-reforms>

and to reflect concerns from the medical profession<sup>657</sup>. Former Health Secretary and Chair of the Health Select Committee Stephen Dorrell subsequently commented on the passing of the bill that the government should now be given “*opportunity to apply it (the new policy) and to demonstrate the value it can create*”<sup>658</sup>.

A further negative dimension relating to the apparent influences behind the formulation and implementation of NHS policy since 2010 has been fuelled by claims that the Conservative Party is too close to lobbyists and business interests who stand to directly benefit in financial terms from the enhanced competition and private investment created by such NHS reforms, with media coverage in early 2010 suggesting that ‘*Tory MPs in charge of health policy had accepted donations from private health-care companies*’<sup>659</sup>. While lobbyists seeking to influence public policy is a regular and somewhat inevitable aspect of any political system, this particular example has raised critical concerns in relation to a more fundamental commercial motive at the heart of Conservative NHS policy formulation, and this would appear to undermine the party leadership’s morally-fused compassionate rhetoric and its agenda for legitimate structural reform of this important public service based on the definitive motive of ensuring its long-term survival as a thriving public service. Such developments about policy motives strike at the heart of the Conservative Party’s aims for NHS policy since returning to national office in 2010, and whether intellectual or philosophical factors are ascendant over more purely political and even commercial policy influences.

One further intellectual factor worth considering when assessing the Conservative Party’s motives and influences within this area of policy is the relevance of the ‘nudge

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<sup>657</sup> Marina Soteriu, ‘*Health Bill receives royal assent and becomes law*’, GP Online, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2012, <http://www.gponline.com/News/article/1124347/Health-Bill-receives-royal-assent-becomes-law/>

<sup>658</sup> Stephen Dorrell MP, cited in Alex Hunt, ‘*Political Lives: Stephen Dorrell*’, BBC News website, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-18352453>

<sup>659</sup> Cited in Rob Baggott, ‘Conservative health policy: change, continuity and policy influence’, in Hugh Bochel (ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch.5, p.94  
See also Holly Watt and Rose Prince, ‘*Andrew Lansley bankrolled by private healthcare provider*’, Daily Telegraph, 14<sup>th</sup> January 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/mps-expenses/6989408/Andrew-Lansley-bankrolled-by-private-healthcare-provider.html>

theory'<sup>660</sup>, which argues that governments have the ability to influence and shape wider social behaviours in a more positive and beneficial direction to suit their overall socio-political agenda, particularly in seeking to align and mould the long-term mentality of the wider population towards its specific policies over a sustained period of time. This theory focuses on behavioural traits and social influences across society, and its core emphasis is that a government's consistent and pro-active overall direction, alongside a recurring message about acceptable or desirable '*social norms*'<sup>661</sup> can produce '*positive economic and social outcomes without resorting to bans or increased regulation*'<sup>662</sup>. This approach has been dubbed '*libertarian paternalism*'<sup>663</sup>, and it is within this context that the government has utilised a "Behavioural Insights Team"<sup>664</sup> as part of the 2010 Coalition Agreement to try to facilitate such outcomes aligned with its own political agenda, yet without seeking an excessively active role for the central state, which is consistent with the broad thrust of the Big Society agenda. This team has therefore initially identified certain aspects of public health policy in particular that can be influenced and shaped in such a way, notably by providing an enhanced and somewhat manipulated 'choice architecture' to the wider general public in a bid to influence its behaviour and specific lifestyle choices.

Examples of this approach to public policy-making can be seen in initiatives such as anti-smoking and healthy eating strategies, principally aimed at altering and moulding the public mood and attitudes in line with a central government public health agenda, yet without the government appearing too authoritarian or interventionist in the process. Within this context, in the sphere of the Cameron-led government's post-2010 health reforms, it is therefore hoped by Conservative political strategists that the public can ultimately be 'nudged' towards gradually accepting the apparent necessity of more devolution and diversified provision within the delivery NHS policy without the need for any further excessive interventionist legislation. It has been a matter of fierce political debate as

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<sup>660</sup> See Richard H.Thaler and Cass R.Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness*, (Yale University Press, New York, 2008)

<sup>661</sup> See Ibid., '*Following the Herd*', Ch.3, p.68

<sup>662</sup> BBC News website, '*Nudge theory trials 'are working' say officials*', 8th February 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-16943729>

<sup>663</sup> Richard H.Thaler and Cass R.Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness*, (Yale University Press, New York, 2008), Introduction, p.4

<sup>664</sup> See Cabinet Office, '*Behavioural Insights Team*' (from July 2010), <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/behavioural-insights-team>



to whether such devolution is a practical means in itself, or whether it is part of the long-term process of ultimately creating a less statist and quasi-privatised health service. It can be argued that such an approach bears some of the hallmarks of the pragmatic reformist Conservatism of Edmund Burke<sup>665</sup>, whose 18<sup>th</sup> century works accepted the necessity of cautious government reform in order to preserve key institutions and allow them to evolve in a preferred way, Burke being someone who was *'optimistic about the ability of parties (and politicians) to make things better'*<sup>666</sup>. This outlook firmly rejected revolutionary upheaval but instead embraced the need for steady, evolutionary political change initiated and controlled by the government. The Burkean alignment to recent NHS reforms can be made on the basis that the service arguably needs to reform and adapt in order to survive, and that *'a sequence of nudges of sufficient strength amounts to a push'*, with the government's role in such key reforms based on the over-arching premise of Big Society thinkers *'that interference is in principle a good rather than a necessary evil'*<sup>667</sup>. This argument would seek to counter the critical viewpoint that the government's post-2010 approach to NHS policy-making is overtly ideological, and it subsequently appears to suggest a detachment from the traditions and principles of the New Right in such an acceptance of a pro-active role for the state. However, the particular direction for the re-imagined state to push the health service towards, or the eventual organisational form that this approach envisages has not yet become fully apparent.

The post-2010 government has therefore sought to create a choice-based framework for socio-economic activity in key social policy areas such as the NHS, but in order to achieve this desired goal it has also embraced an approach that includes a notable role for government in seeking to *'steer people's choices in directions that will improve their lives'*<sup>668</sup>, yet without being excessively overbearing. This is particularly prevalent in the sphere of contemporary healthcare policy and the way that the NHS is organised and run on a practical basis. Given that government health reforms from 2010 contain individualistic

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<sup>665</sup> See Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), also Thaler and Sunstein (2008), Ch.17, p.238

<sup>666</sup> David Willetts MP, interview with author, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012

<sup>667</sup> Jason Edwards, 'Freedom, Free Institutions and the Big Society', cited in Jason Edwards (ed). *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012), p.100

<sup>668</sup> Richard H.Thaler and Cass R.Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness*, (Yale University Press, New York, 2008), Introduction, p.5

and neo-liberal choice-based elements that are controversial and provocative from the perspective of some prominent opinions within the established medical profession, the political classes and the media, the government is conscious of not provoking any further unnecessary opposition, particularly given its vulnerable parliamentary position within the context of coalition government. It has therefore approached this policy-making dynamic with some caution; establishing a House of Lords Committee to look into the nature of 'nudge'-originated policy in 2011<sup>669</sup>, and this specific approach of governance has therefore adopted a libertarian ethos in its core message, seeking to limit the need for extra legislation and excessive government intervention to achieve its desired outcome, as the strategy of changing people's attitudes '*cost(s) little or nothing..... impos(ing) no burden on taxpayers at all*'<sup>670</sup>. Therefore while the nature of the post-2010 NHS reforms may endure some short-term hostility, in practical terms this government emphasis on addressing and analysing wider social behaviour seeks to 'nudge' popular culture and the mood of broader society in a specific long-term direction in order to bolster the socio-political outcome that the government wants, namely a more streamlined, marketised and autonomous policy vision for the health service. This approach ultimately aspires to erode the structural constraints and social obstacles attached to the health service that have in the immediate term limited the scope of such reforms, and it therefore seeks to achieve this without resorting to interventionist, coercive or expensive government activity to do so. However it remains to be seen as to whether this approach will eventually create a scenario that will result in the type of service structure that the post-2010 government desires, as well as increasing the levels of popular support for such reforms and their associated outcomes. This long-term approach therefore seeks to ultimately persuade people that the reforms to the NHS are effective and necessary measures on both a practical and financial level in the long-term, and in doing so aim to suppress the high degree of initial opposition and controversy that such proposals have generated in the short-term at least.

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<sup>669</sup> House of Lords Science and Technology Sub-Committee, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2011, <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/science-and-technology-committee/inquiries/behaviour/>

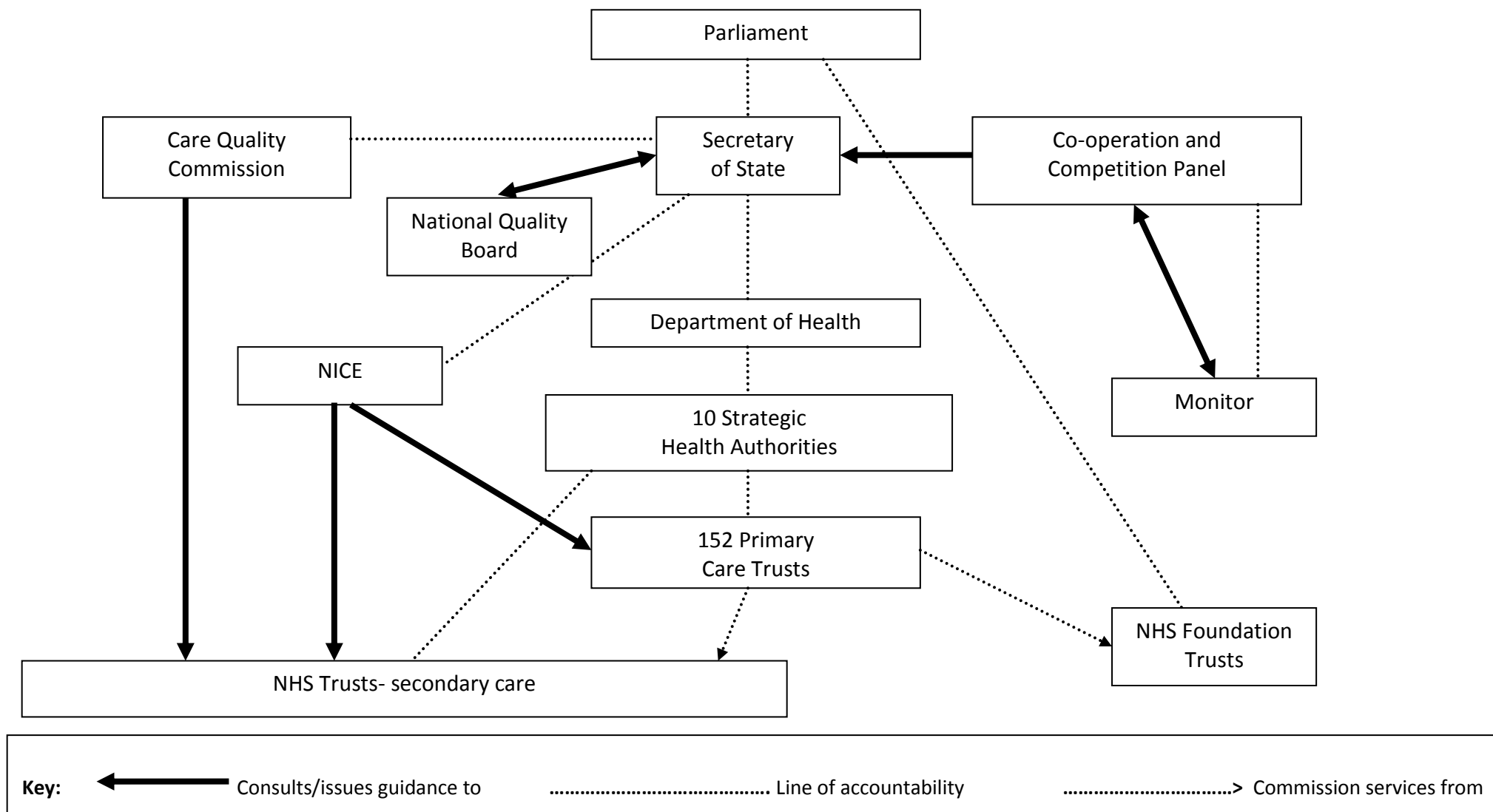
<sup>670</sup> Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness*, (Yale University Press, New York, 2008), Introduction, p.13

The influences and aims that have driven the Conservative-led government's reforms of the NHS after 2010 are therefore varied and multi-dimensional, with competition and tensions evident between the significance of vigorous ideological factors, the pressures of cost and economic factors as well as the pragmatic statecraft and cautious and gradual 'Burkean' reform, all of which have been at the heart of how this social policy has evolved. The party has also faced institutional and structural limits within the NHS organisation itself in pursuing its specific policy agenda while in government, alongside commercially-driven external lobbying and the recurring New Right desire of reducing and removing statist and managerial bureaucracy and instilling greater choice within a monolithic state service, which has lingered on from the 1980s and has again been evident since 2010. The more radical elements of the New Right legacy have not been wholly rejected, but they have been tempered by the party's strategic desire and electoral need to both emphasise its compassionate credentials and appease its coalition partners in such social policy matters. Such various influences and factors has led to the 21<sup>st</sup> century Conservative Party making explicit and somewhat unprecedented pledges in government to protect and maintain investment in the NHS, and this has alienated many within the party's New Right tradition in the process. However in a somewhat quixotic manner that indicates a lack of clear and coherent short-term political direction on this social policy issue, the Conservative-led government has also sought to use the powers of the state to simultaneously and progressively 'nudge' public opinion towards accepting a more marketised, diversified and devolved organisational structure as a price for securing the long-term future of the NHS in some form or other. Within this process of organisational and institutional reform there has been some considerable debate as to whether the post-2010 coalition government is genuinely committed to devolved decision-making within the NHS or whether it will revert to the tendency of many governments of imposing policy from the centre in order to meet its key political aims, while also seeking to reduce overall costs in line with the austerity agenda. Again, like educational policy, there have been clear movements and gestures towards a changed social policy in this specific sphere, but it is open to conjecture as to whether the Conservative-led government's overall approach to NHS policy and its desire to radically transform the nature of service delivery will eventually emerge from the shackles of austerity into the formation of a clearer and more streamlined, de-centralised and rationed version of the current organisational model, which can deliver in a functional and

practical sense. This challenging task is further complicated by the desire of Conservative modernisers to seek to maintain an adherence to an enabling, co-ordinating yet not hegemonic state structure, while simultaneously embracing an ethos and framework within the NHS that promotes the communitarian tendencies of the Big Society's broad socio-political agenda.

**Diagram One- Previous NHS Structure (pre-2010)**, Adapted from source:

<http://offlinehbpl.hbpl.co.uk/NewsAttachments/PG/Previous%20NHS%20structure.pdf>, GP Online, 5th July 2011, 'How clinical commissioning groups will work',

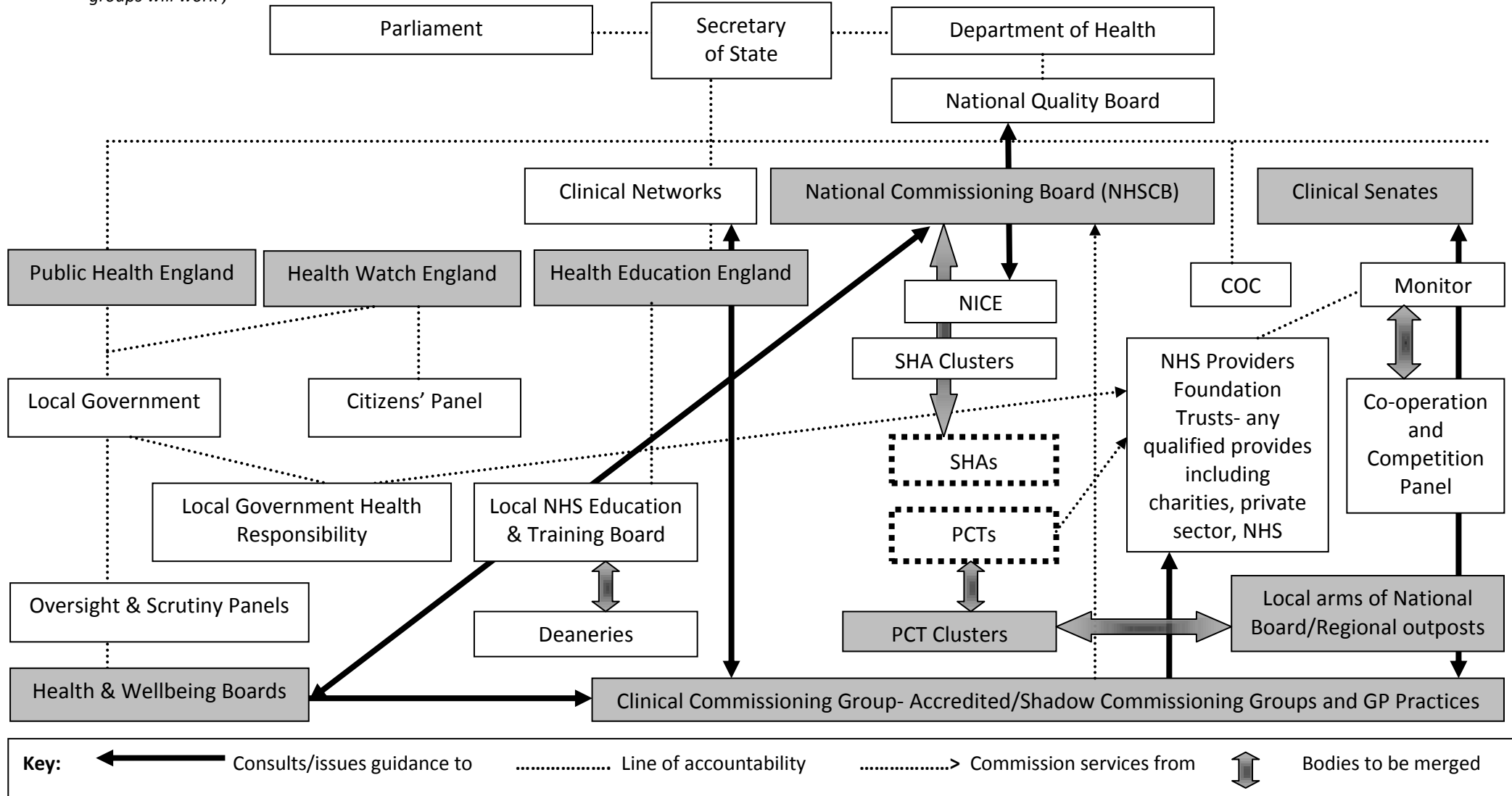


\*- New body

\*- Existing bodies retained until April 2013

**Diagram Two- (David Cameron's New NHS Bureaucracy after 2010):**

Adapted from source: <http://offlinehbpl.hbpl.co.uk/NewsAttachments/PG/new%20NHS%20bureaucracy.pdf>, GP Online, 5th July 2011, 'How clinical commissioning groups will work',



## **Conclusion- The nature and evolution of Modern Conservative social policy**

### **The focus on De-Bureaucratization and 'Progress'**

This thesis has ultimately aimed to identify and address the extent of change that has been evident in the shaping and formulation of Conservative Party social policy since the party emphatically lost national office in 1997. Having assessed a range of theoretical, ideological and practical social policy developments over recent years, a concluding overview needs to be reached in order to bring the various factors and components identified together. In seeking to develop a clear and coherent concluding position within the overall thesis, it needs to be explicitly observed and acknowledged that a new generation of 21<sup>st</sup> century Conservative politicians and theorists have been at the forefront of seeking to reform and modernise the party's social policy agenda since the late 1990s, and on a basic level this indicates a degree of change. In doing so they have faced internal political opposition and wider public and media scepticism, but they have persisted in determinedly pursuing this socio-political strategy that has actively sought to promote the ultimate and pivotal aim of innovating and developing the party's image and stance in relation to the intricacies of a range of welfare policy spheres such as Education, the NHS and broader public service delivery and reform. In adopting such an approach they have sought to reflect the changing nature of British society by engaging with such new socio-political moods and attitudes by embracing new and diverse means of service delivery, with particular emphasis on private, community and charitable sectors that are detached from the centralised state. They have therefore aspired to instil such associated policy initiatives with a specific localist and grassroots angle, ensuring that they are located within an overarching model of governance that is aligned with the broad theme of a de-bureaucratized '*leaner state*'<sup>671</sup>.

As a practical consequence of such an approach, this has suggested that public services and social policy that have been traditionally provided by central government could be fragmented, outsourced or sub-contracted to potentially more efficient and devolved bodies, ostensibly empowering individual citizens and local communities in the process.

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<sup>671</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, (University of Buckingham Press, Buckingham, 2010), Ch.12, p.230

While this approach has echoes of the New Right's neo-liberal agenda for public service provision during the 1980s, an expressed and re-emphasised desire of the post-2010 coalition government has apparently been to achieve the reinvigoration of a decentralised model of the state that is not about dismantling institutions on purely ideological grounds, but which instead seeks to focus on practicality while maintaining a compassionate tone and to devise a pro-active, strategic and co-coordinating role for a more limited and re-constituted state structure. Within this context, the more durable and flexible components of the state can continue to function effectively and more efficiently in practical terms, albeit within a more streamlined model of service delivery. This approach has in turn sought to encourage the emergence of a revived and revitalised civil society that has been identified as the key mechanism for the empowerment of individuals and communities, and which seeks to generate growing levels of social action emanating from '*civic institutions and forms of collective activity that are not state activity*'<sup>672</sup>, and in the process evolve from and genuinely transcend the post-1945 model of centralised, bureaucratic universalism.

This approach to re-moulding governance and related best practices has manifested itself in practical terms under the auspices of the so-called 'Big Society', a symbolic policy in itself that has reflected a concerted and focused agenda to generate enhanced innovation and 'progressive' new thought into the provision of social policy via a diverse range of providers from across the public, private and third sectors, with such an ambivalent term as 'progress' reflecting an optimistic approach that '*things could get better, problems were not intractable and things weren't just inevitably getting worse*'<sup>673</sup>. The aspirations for such a socio-political agenda are succinctly contained within two key documents produced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition-namely the White Paper 'Open Public Services'<sup>674</sup> (July 2011), alongside the 2011 Localism Act<sup>675</sup> - both of which focus on choice and control, decentralisation, diversity, fairness and accountability; a range of vocabulary that symbolises a collective dynamic to promote the mantra of '*collaboration and diversity in the*

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<sup>672</sup> David Willetts MP, interview with author, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012

<sup>673</sup> Ibid.

<sup>674</sup> The Cabinet Office, '*Open Public Service White Paper*', (2011-12), <http://www.openpublicservices.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/>

<sup>675</sup> Localism Act 2011, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/20/contents/enacted>



*provision of public services*<sup>676</sup>. Within the wider context of rising financial costs within the provision of welfare and social policy, both documents appear to form the bedrock of the government's ongoing programme of public service reform for the remainder of its proposed term of office up to 2015, although how successful such 'progressive social conservatism' has actually been in social, economic and political terms has been open to some scepticism and criticism as the coalition government has evolved<sup>677</sup>. In particular, evidence has emerged from the fairly radical reforms since 2010 to key public services such as the educational system and the NHS, that attempts to 'de-bureaucratize' these key areas of social policy have failed to liberate public service provision from the tentacles of state control and have actually created additional layers of bureaucracy in the process.

### **The state vs. voluntarism as a vehicle for social justice**

Alongside the unerring drive towards achieving improved levels of economic efficiency, progressive innovation and streamlined bureaucratic performance within the government's delivery of key social policies, the need to achieve outcomes perceived to be positive and constructive such as the pursuit of a fairer society or the achievement of greater social justice have also been prominent aspects within the contemporary social policy debate. This has been particularly so in the post-Thatcher political climate from the early 1990s onwards, given the criticism that the divisions between rich and poor grew considerably during this particular period under governments of both major parties, continuing a socially divisive trend that began during the 1980s. However, the means and methods of achieving such 'socially just' ends have been the subject of significant political conjecture, with the competing yet overlapping roles of the state, the voluntary sector and the private sector all active components of the contemporary policy debate. Indeed, the need to strike an appropriate balance between their key functions and interests appears to be an integral feature to this specific political dialogue. Although such key terms and concepts associated with social justice have been broadly associated with the left of the political spectrum and

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<sup>676</sup> Louise Bamfield, 'Beginning the Big Society in the Early Years', cited in Jason Edwards (ed). *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012), p.171

<sup>677</sup> Gavin Kelly, 'Cameron must quickly rediscover progressive conservatism', *Financial Times Opinion*, May 27<sup>th</sup> 2012, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7f9685f0-a5bd-11e1-b77a-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2A1yWO4Dy>

were exploited by New Labour to its political advantage from the mid-1990s onwards, mainstream British Conservatism has attempted to re-invent and de-toxify its image in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and many pragmatic right-of-centre politicians and think-tanks have sought to adapt to and re-mould the tone of this more leftist vocabulary, seeking to develop their own version of social justice and initiating innovative and electorally attractive policy responses in the process. Despite a historical Conservative acceptance of the reality of socio-economic inequality there has been instilled an appropriate fusion of influences into this modern Conservative social policy agenda, and this has exposed some key factors behind the formulation of such policies, on the one hand acknowledging the influence of the vigorous ideology of the 'New Right' and its more radical critique and proposed reforms of the bureaucratic state, yet also accepting the reality of the impact of thirteen years of New Labour rule and its steady, yet allegedly inefficient, investment into key public services nestled within local communities. Given this latter legacy, the Conservative modernisers have accepted this development and cautiously embraced some functional aspects of existing public policy provision, while also seeking to steadily 'nudge' public opinion in a slightly different and more 'conservative' direction, in an approach that is aligned with gradual 'Burkean' tendencies, and which has sought to maintain aspects of the existing state and its 'organic' nature, as well as its associated community values where both practical and appropriate.

The former neo-liberal influence has led some academic commentators to make links between the Thatcher agenda of the 1980s and the Cameron programme since 2010 in relation to ostensibly shared attitudes towards key public services traditionally provided by the state. This viewpoint suggests that despite their contrasting rhetoric in relation to key terms such as 'society' and 'community', both the Thatcher administration and the post-2010 Conservative-led coalition are *'founded on the same neo-liberal antagonism towards the public sector which is seen as crowding out the private sector'*<sup>678</sup>, and both administrations can be viewed as being broadly hostile to 'the state'. However the Burkean tradition could be said to retain some influence over post-2010 social policy direction, accepting the need to maintain and preserve the existence of key public institutions and

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<sup>678</sup> Steve Corbett and Alan Walker, 'The Big Society: Back to the Future', *The Political Quarterly*, Volume 3, Issue 3, (July-September 2012), p.487

services which have the necessary capacity, utility and flexibility to be able to function within a more limited and peripheral role for the state. This approach retains a key streak of Conservative pragmatism and adherence to tradition, adhering to the view that British society and its overall political structure is an evolutionary and organic entity which therefore seeks to maintain and conserve the best aspects of the existing socio-political order while continuing to develop and improve in terms of its functionality, efficiency and value-for-money. This has been evident in the context of contemporary Conservative attempts to adopt a renewed and high-profile enthusiasm for delivering quality public services in a more original and decentralised manner, an approach that symbolises the focus of modern Conservatism that seeks to emphasise and align with the perceived communitarian and associated altruistic values of wider 21<sup>st</sup> century society. In therefore seeking to utilise and adapt traditional and viable public institutions, such a socio-political approach has ultimately sought to utilise the energy of charitable activity, the vibrancy of voluntarism alongside more emphasis on the commercial values of private sector providers in preference to monolithic state power where possible, and has been summarised by a contemporary Cabinet Minister as follows:

*‘Conservatives believe that voluntarism is a good thing, and sometimes the state can be an obstacle to effective voluntarism, but at other times such voluntary organisations need support from the state. Your value system has to be that voluntary support comes first’<sup>679</sup>.*

Such concerted and spirited recent attempts to specifically revive the values of voluntarism and its functionality, alongside more diverse private service providers as a complementary and alternative source of public service provision to the formerly hegemonic and centralised state, has therefore been central to attempts to create a ‘re-imagined’ or revised role for the post-war state within this more devolved approach to social policy. However it remains a subject of some conjecture as to whether social entrepreneurs along with smaller, voluntarist and localised bodies can realistically and effectively compete with the financial might of established multi-national private bodies and existing public agencies in the supply and provision of quality public services while maintaining adequate value for money for the

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<sup>679</sup> David Willetts MP, interview with author, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012

taxpayer, as such larger providers may often *'provide the cheapest option..... and this may drive out smaller providers who are more local and accountable'*<sup>680</sup>. This suggests that what is being proposed in terms of more diverse public service provision does not equate to a level playing field, and such practical issues do offer potential obstacles to this policy approach, yet it ultimately still appears to be the case that the gut instinct of mainstream British Conservatism continues to be sceptical of the role of the state, and therefore rejects the likelihood or practicability of achieving greater state-induced levels of equality and conventional interpretations of 'statist' social justice as a feasible aspiration for modern society. This indicates ongoing tensions within Conservative social policy-making, and it perhaps reflects an inherent dilemma of contemporary British Conservatism of the need to find a more viable and dynamic role for the state alongside other viable components of public service delivery. The party seems to retain a scepticism towards pre-determined and rationalist outcomes moulded by statist influences, based on the fundamental premise that an enhanced degree of social autonomy and more variable individual responsibility is always a better alternative to the overbearing power and 'meddling' of the state, which can be viewed from this perspective as creating greater levels of dependency, bureaucracy and state influenced social 'injustice' across society, while being *'highly centralised and paternalistic..... intrusive (and) pervasive'*<sup>681</sup>.

This position can again be linked to the writings of Edmund Burke, who in analysing the tumultuous French Revolution from a conservative angle in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, praised the value of a multitude of devolved *'little platoons'*<sup>682</sup> of social activity, as opposed to a *'monolithic, top-down, repressive society'*<sup>683</sup> that he believed the post-revolutionary French state had developed into. According to a right-of-centre libertarian perspective therefore, the state's role has the capacity to evolve negatively into a corrosive social influence over time, which in its centralising tendencies *'not only destroys the sense of community spirit and individual initiative, but also destroys the very possibility of their revival'*<sup>684</sup>. In

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<sup>680</sup> Johnston Birchall, 'The Big Society and the "Mutualisation" of Public Services', cited in Jason Edwards (ed). *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012), p.155

<sup>681</sup> Louise Bamfield, 'Beginning the Big Society in the Early Years', cited in Ibid., p.163

<sup>682</sup> See Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, (1790), paras. 75-99

<sup>683</sup> Richard Kelly and Robert Crowcroft, 'Conservatism, Multiculturalism and The Big Society', cited in Jason Edwards (ed). *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012), p.112

<sup>684</sup> Jeremy Jennings, 'Tocqueville and the Big Society', cited in ibid., p.78

embracing this theory of 'little platoons' of localised activity that are valued for providing the 'bottom-up' dynamism to generate society and communitarianism, the state was viewed as a negative influence that was expected to '*retreat to the role of regulator instead of being a direct provider of services*'<sup>685</sup>. In many contemporary western societies such a scenario has not happened, to the chagrin and frustration of many Conservatives. However, notable contemporary books such as the Spirit Level<sup>686</sup> have challenged this pessimism and scepticism of the state's effectiveness, developing the alternative argument that a more egalitarian society is both achievable and indeed a more desirable aspiration via an active and interventionist state that is co-ordinated at a more central than localised level. However such a rationalistic and deterministic outlook continues to be at odds with traditional Conservative opposition to centralised planning alongside abstract ideals and associated imposed outcomes.

### **Social Conservatism under David Cameron: A fusion of Autonomous Localism, Communitarianism and Fiscal Retrenchment**

The rhetoric and emphasis of the Cameron leadership since its emergence at the end of 2005 has ultimately marked a departure from the sharp and explicit economic edge of Thatcherism, acknowledging the importance of a communitarian focus and the need for a revitalised civil society that had arguably been neglected by Thatcherism and suffocated by New Labour. This new Conservative viewpoint accepted the requirement for an element of regulatory pro-activity by the state, yet at the same time aspiring towards a more financially efficient, devolved and localised level of public service delivery. There is subsequently evidence of some flexibility and distinctive approaches within modern Conservatism, which does appear to distinguish its message and overall approach in relation to the delivery of key social policies within the context of the party's Thatcherite legacy. In attaching the concepts of localism, autonomy and community to the agenda of modern social Conservatism, this revised viewpoint does appear to acknowledge a constructive and positive function for the state within a more streamlined model of government in the 21st

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<sup>685</sup> Steve Corbett and Alan Walker, 'The Big Society: Back to the Future', *The Political Quarterly*, Volume 3, Issue 3, (July-September 2012), p.490

<sup>686</sup> Richard Wilkinson & Kate Pickett, '*The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*', (Allen Lane, London, 2009)

century. However in their adamant rejection of the model of a hegemonic state as sole provider of public services (as has existed for most of the post-war era), advocates of New Conservatism who wish to instil the doctrine with a more compassionate and moral tone argue that it is essential for people to fundamentally review and revise their relationship with the state in order for both themselves and the machinery of government to work at their most efficient and productive level, and which will lead to the emergence of a:

*'connected society..... (a society) that was organised horizontally, not vertically, so as to place these intermediate institutions at its heart'*<sup>687</sup>.

This specific aspect provides the policy agenda with a more radical edge, but again it is questionable as to how such a localist and 'connected' society will emerge in practical terms, particularly given the drive towards austerity and the lack of supporting public funds since 2010. Such difficulties of practical realisation have led to frustration within the inner circle of Cameron's Conservatives at the failure of this policy agenda to fully launch, with prominent advocates such as Steve Hilton<sup>688</sup> and Baron Wei<sup>689</sup> departing from the political frontline within a year of each other due to their apparent frustrations with the various bureaucratic and institutional obstacles that this policy agenda has faced. Nevertheless, the inherent desire for a more horizontal model of society in relation to the state is an interesting one, and in philosophical and theoretical terms at least this view as recently espoused by Norman and Ganesh represents a socio-political approach that envisages the natural linkage of people 'horizontally' alongside each other in society, communally bonded by the key institutions of a more voluntarist model of civil society rather than looking upwards towards an invasive and overwhelming interventionist and ultra-prescriptive state.

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<sup>687</sup> Jesse Norman and Janas Ganesh, *'Compassionate Conservatism: What it is, why we need it'*, Policy Exchange (2006), Ch.4, p.43,

<http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/compassionate%20conservatism%20-%20june%2006.pdf>

<sup>688</sup> Toby Helm, *'After Steve Hilton, where will the prime minister get his ideas from now?'*, The Observer, Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> March 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2012/mar/04/policy-chief-departure-betrays-tory-policy-anger>

See also Phillip Blond, Respublica think-tank, interview with author, 19th February 2013, who claimed that *'Osborne is an (economic) liberal..... and he has effectively managed to kill (The Big Society agenda) and drive Steve Hilton out'*.

<sup>689</sup> Cabinet Office, *'Lord Wei stands down'*, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2011,

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/lord-wei-stands-down>

This vision ultimately involves the creation of semi-autonomous bodies such as Free Schools and devolved sectors within the NHS, which are essentially:

*‘autonomous institutions governing themselves but publicly funded, providing their own identity as a hospital or school but not be seen as the arm of a local authority or a district health authority’.*<sup>690</sup>

The new variant of social Conservatism of the Cameron era argues that such bodies will seek to ensure enhanced value for money and guarantee the necessary financial savings while maintaining an adequate public service provision. There does however appear to be some practical dangers in aspiring to achieve such a radical reorientation and re-alignment of society’s basic structure and the subsequent delivery of key social policies, namely that if this fairly ambitious experiment towards greater autonomy and a revived civil society fails to overcome existing structures and an austerity agenda, it could result in newly-devolved public services such as free schools and a less bureaucratic NHS failing in their delivery and practical implementation, and the government may then ironically end up even more reliant on the centralised state’s utility. This may result in it ultimately having to *‘fall back on the more authoritarian policies of its predecessors’*<sup>691</sup> being forced to impose less flexible variants of social policy from the centre again, with further expense generated in the process.

The likelihood of such policy failures has been heightened and exacerbated by the austerity agenda and fiscal restraints imposed by the coalition government since 2010, and some former supporters turned critics of the coalition’s agenda in this social policy sphere (such as Philip Blond), have implied that such failings are already evident as of late 2012. This viewpoint claims that Cameron’s grand social project has already met with failure in its social impact, and it accuses the Conservative Leader of baulking at the prospect of genuine social policy reform and instead appearing to endorse a programme fuelled by retrenchment rather than social radicalism, which in the process has re-toxified the party

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<sup>690</sup> David Willetts MP, interview with author, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012

<sup>691</sup> Johnston Birchall, ‘The Big Society and the “Mutualisation” of Public Services’, cited in Jason Edwards (ed). *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012), p.156

brand<sup>692</sup> rather than re-invigorating it. In a purely practical sense therefore, this new Conservative social policy agenda has therefore represented a major political gamble in its attempts to re-define the role of the state and public service provision while at the same time seeking to revise and re-brand the party's formerly tarnished image in this particular policy area. Within such an apparently fluid and flexible contemporary approach it could be argued that Cameron's various social policy initiatives, shaped in the wake of three successive electoral defeats and focusing on greater mutualism, co-operation and devolved social action, could be seen in political terms as a risk-laden yet genuine attempt to achieve a renewed and more efficient balance between the state and the individual in modern British society, and in this sense seek to '*develop public policies that recognise, protect and enhance our connected society, and that enrich the cultural conversation within it*'<sup>693</sup>. While this approach therefore seeks to both reject 'big government' while also retain some aspects of the moral and individualistic imperatives of the New Right socio-economic agenda of the 1980s, it does at least accept and acknowledge the need for a co-ordinating role for the state in initiating the delivery of social policies that aspire to achieve improved and more individualistic variants of social justice, an enhanced culture of citizenship and greater opportunities to increase social mobility. This civil and cultural emphasis, alongside the promotion of a more diverse, radical and innovative range of public-private methods for policy delivery, suggests a degree of detachment from the more wholly marketised focus of the New Right during the 1980s, although not a complete abandonment of this approach due to the persistent attachment to the neo-liberal notion of a more autonomous and diversified public service provision.

In embracing and addressing this contemporary socio-political challenge therefore, the Cameron leadership has appeared to influence the development of a further variation on Conservative typologies and subsequently contributed to '*the complex ideological*

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<sup>692</sup> Phillip Blond, '*David Cameron has lost his chance to redefine the Tories*', Comment is Free, The Guardian, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/03/cameron-one-nation-u-turn-tory-tragedy>

<sup>693</sup> Jesse Norman and Janan Ganesh, '*Compassionate Conservatism: What it is, why we need it*', Policy Exchange (2006), Ch.4, p.55,

<http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/compassionate%20conservatism%20-%20june%2006.pdf>



*configurations within contemporary British conservatism*<sup>694</sup>, although whether his specific form of Conservatism is a genuinely new variant is open to debate. In rhetorical terms at least, he appears to have rejected calls from the right of his party for a more explicit embrace of neo-liberal economics and deregulation, and in rejecting this position and acknowledging and ‘rediscovering’<sup>695</sup> the significance of ‘society’ as a specific alternative to the state, he has embraced a softer and more compassionate tone. From this approach has stemmed the notion of a ‘re-imagined state’, and this particular stance appears to align with the more communitarian and socially-focused ‘Red Tory’ agenda of Phillip Blond. In wholly electoral terms Cameron and the Conservative ‘modernisers’ have therefore acknowledged the importance of ‘crossing a political boundary’ in relation to previously negative images of the Conservative Party in office, resulting in the determined pursuit of a revived brand of Conservatism that is associated with a more compassionate and communitarian image<sup>696</sup>, and which also accepts the need for a distinct yet limited role for a re-modelled state in order to secure for the party a broader ‘*appeal across the political spectrum*’<sup>697</sup>.

However in practical terms, such compassionate and communitarian rhetoric is coupled with an agenda of fiscal austerity since taking office in May 2010, and this has proved to be a major stumbling block in turning such aspirational socially-focused rhetoric into political reality. This is because it is arguably the case that if the Big Society agenda is to work and function broadly how Cameron and his allies envisage, it requires sufficient public funds to support and achieve its aims (at least in the short-term), and these have not been forthcoming. Indeed, such has been the scale of retrenchment since 2010 that a consensus is growing that the scale of cuts is much greater than the 1980s, with the post-2010 government presiding over ‘*the biggest cuts in public expenditure since the 1920s*’<sup>698</sup>. In the context of this agenda of financial cutbacks therefore, this lack of investment to stimulate

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<sup>694</sup> Heppell, T. and Hill, M., ‘Ideological Typologies of Contemporary British Conservatism’, *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 3, p.335, (2005).

<sup>695</sup> See M.Glasman, ‘Society not state: the challenge of the Big Society’, *Public Policy Research* (June-August 2010), p.61

<sup>696</sup> Allegra Stratton, ‘David Cameron: Tory Party is “modern and compassionate”’, *The Guardian*, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/oct/02/cameron-tory-party-modern-compassionate>

<sup>697</sup> Alan Ware, ‘The Big Society and Conservative Politics’, cited in Jason Edwards (ed). *Retrieving the Big Society*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012), p.87

<sup>698</sup> Steve Corbett and Alan Walker, ‘The Big Society: Back to the Future’, *The Political Quarterly*, Volume 3, Issue 3, (July-September 2012), p.490

the desired grassroots activity has undermined Cameron's promise of a revised and reinvigorated social Conservatism working in harmony alongside a more diverse, devolved and flexible range of public service providers. Indeed, some alarmist warnings from the frontline of local government have warned that such a culture of financial austerity runs the risk of instigating the collapse of civil society<sup>699</sup> that the Cameron leadership has placed so much emphasis on revitalising since the end of 2005. The austerity agenda has therefore ensured that the vision of a flourishing 'Big Society' emerging to replace a creaking centralised state has been subject to significant questioning and scepticism in terms of practical delivery in the months and years that have followed.

It is within this overall context that at a fundamental level, the Conservative Party's approach to such policy matters since 1997 has featured a fusion of pressures that have culminated in a *'debate between modernisers and traditionalists on social issues (that) has also become inextricably intertwined with the wider question of how the party should seek to revive its electoral fortunes'*<sup>700</sup>. While the rhetorical focus and emphasis on social issues has certainly become more ascendant and appears to have developed and evolved in a more distinctively communitarian manner since the last period of Conservative government in the 1980s and 90s, challenging financial realities have often meant that such well-meaning rhetorical sentiments have been crushed by the realities of everyday politics and have failed to deliver in practical policy terms. Such practical financial aspects have certainly hindered the promotion of The Big Society agenda since 2010, and this has meant that aligning fiscal conservatism to the delivery of enhanced social justice has proved to be an extremely challenging scenario for Conservative modernisers. According to one academic observation, this agenda is therefore one which will struggle to deliver such socially just outcomes, on the basis that it is primarily ideologically-driven by a:

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<sup>699</sup> *'Spending cuts will create social unrest in our cities'*, (Nick Forbes, Leader, Newcastle City Council, Julie Dore, Leader, Sheffield City Council, Joe Anderson, Mayor of Liverpool), Letters Page, The Observer, Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> December 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2012/dec/29/letters-coalition-cuts-threaten-cities>

<sup>700</sup> Richard Hayton, 'Conservative Party Modernisation and David Cameron's Politics of the Family', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol.81, No.4, (October-December 2010), p.498

*'neo-liberal economic agenda which prioritises cuts in public expenditure and, therefore, fails to deliver even the minimum resources necessary to transform rhetoric into reality'*<sup>701</sup>.

This in turn raises the ultimate question as to whether the pivotal factor in shaping revamped and re-branded social Conservatism in the 21st century is in fact a renewed sense of ideological vigour that has been subtly promoted and which has sought to achieve a revised clarity and focus on social policy matters, and which has in turn generated a distinct, original and re-marketised style of political language. Also evident has been the unerring presence of flexible and pragmatic Conservative manoeuvring and measured calculation in its reaction to changing socio-economic circumstances since the 2008 recession, and these are developments that have that favoured the party's fiscal conservative instincts, and which once again illustrate the party's atavistic pursuit of political power and desire for enhanced levels of electoral popularity in order to pursue an agenda that remains aligned with a post-1979 ideological emphasis and which has been heavily shaped by neo-liberal influences. According to Phillip Blond, who since 2010 appears to have lost faith in Cameron's ability to deliver The Big Society agenda within a more devolved governmental structure attached to a 'fairer' and 'progressive' social model, the Cameron leadership is said to be *'surrounded by pragmatists who constantly behave as if short-term electoral advantage is long-term strategic thinking'*<sup>702</sup>. This would suggest a lack of an overarching vision to the party's social policy agenda, and in turn suggesting a cosmetic and artificial element to the party's revised 'compassionate' image and which has undermined its desire to attract a broader range of socio-political support. Difficulties in this sphere appeared to be evident in late 2012 when George Osborne recruited to his staff Neil O'Brien of the think-tank Policy Exchange, who has *'warned that the party is still seen as the champion of the rich'*<sup>703</sup>, an indicator that the de-toxification strategy has not been an absolute success.

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<sup>701</sup> Steve Corbett and Alan Walker, 'The Big Society: Back to the Future', *The Political Quarterly*, Volume 3, Issue 3, (July-September 2012), p.490

<sup>702</sup> Phillip Blond, 'David Cameron has lost his chance to redefine the Tories', *Comment is Free*, The Guardian, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/03/cameron-one-nation-u-turn-tory-tragedy>

<sup>703</sup> Nicholas Watt, 'George Osborne hires thinktank boss to attract new voters', The Guardian, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2012/nov/30/george-osborne-thinktank-boss-new-voters>

## Overview: The Impact of Coalition with the Liberal Democrats on Conservative social policy

As has been suggested at various points within the thesis, the fact that the Conservatives have governed since 2010 at the head of a formal coalition arrangement with the Liberal Democrats would appear to be a significant factor in how government policy has practically evolved in general. There has indeed been much speculation within media and political circles as to what extent social and economic policy would have differed if the Conservatives had governed alone and whether the general thrust and direction of the government's policy agenda would have been different if there had been a majority Conservative government. While some modernising and moderate Conservatives appear to have welcomed the coalition as a means of pursuing a more moderate socio-political course with *'the position of the right wing of the Conservative Party..... notably weakened'*<sup>704</sup>, others from the party's traditional right-wing factions have become frustrated by the party's post-2010 blurred identity. However a number of commentators and observers have argued that the key reason for this electoral outcome was that the party had failed to sufficiently modernise and 'de-toxify' its policy agenda and image up to this point:

*'because the modernisation process was stalled when it was – at best – half-complete, the voters were still unsure about the Tories on May 6, 2010'*<sup>705</sup>.

In this sense, the coalition with the Liberal Democrats can be seen as the catalyst for the final thrust of attempted modernisation and detoxification within the contemporary

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<sup>704</sup> See David Laws, *22 Days in May: The Birth of the Lib-Dem Conservative Coalition*, (Biteback, London, 2010). Laws adds that *'the boldness of the coalition and the concessions on policy might act as a huge "detoxifier" of a Conservative brand which had still not quite been "cleansed" by the Cameron team'*, Diary entry, Tuesday 11th May 2010, p.200

Laws' viewpoint about Conservative 'detoxification' is echoed by d'Ancona below.

<sup>705</sup> Matthew D'Ancona, *'Ditching their modernisation campaign was the Tories' worst strategic error since the poll tax'*, The Daily Telegraph. 30th December 2012, [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/matthewd\\_ancona/9770645/Ditching-their-modernisation-campaign-was-the-Tories-worst-strategic-error-since-the-poll-tax.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/matthewd_ancona/9770645/Ditching-their-modernisation-campaign-was-the-Tories-worst-strategic-error-since-the-poll-tax.html)

An edited version of Matthew D'Ancona's chapter in Ryan Shorthouse (ed.), *Tory modernisation 2.0: the future of the Conservative Party*, (Bright Blue, London, 2013)

Conservative Party, based on the principal premise (accepted by pragmatic Conservatives) that:

*'Mr Cameron may have tried hard to change his party during the previous five years, but it seems that it still left many voters less than impressed'*<sup>706</sup>.

On this basis the Conservatives have rhetorically at least, embraced a more 'liberal' line on various such social policy issues covering both public service and lifestyle, ranging from enhanced investment in the NHS, supporting same-sex marriage and promoting the pupil premium in educational policy, prompting the Liberal Democrat leadership to accept during coalition negotiations that *'we could agree sensible positions with the Conservatives on most issues'*<sup>707</sup>. The coalition agreement could therefore be viewed from one perspective as a direct and natural consequence of the Conservative Party's failure to sufficiently change its image and win both a parliamentary majority and a more convincing proportion of the national vote, despite somewhat paradoxically having adopted a clearly more 'liberal' and compassionate tone, with David Cameron regularly referring to himself as a 'liberal' Conservative<sup>708</sup>. Such factors will however have further accelerated the likelihood of a constructive and viable governmental arrangement with the Liberal Democrats, and this thesis has subsequently offered significant evidence that although the Conservatives are clearly the majority players within the post-2010 coalition and have sought and succeeded to instigate the agenda on many policy fronts, the outcome and product of certain aspects of social policy in particular has appeared to be modified and amended due to intervention from the junior coalition partners. In terms of economic policy many within the 'Orange Book' Liberal Democrat faction and across the wider party have adapted to support the fundamental agenda of tackling the legacy of New Labour's 'big government' and subsequent programme of 'deficit reduction', and from this perspective they have also been willing to embrace some aspects of welfare reform since 2010.

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<sup>706</sup> John Curtice, Stephen Fisher and Robert Ford, 'An Analysis of the Results', cited in Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010), Appendix 2, p.400

<sup>707</sup> David Laws, *22 Days in May: The Birth of the Lib-Dem Conservative Coalition*, (Biteback, London, 2010), Diary entry, Sunday 9th May 2010, p.120

<sup>708</sup> David Cameron, interview with Andrew Marr, *'David Cameron: I am 'Liberal Conservative''*, BBC News website, 16<sup>th</sup> May 2010, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/8685185.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8685185.stm)

However in some key aspects of social policy reform they appear to have been less convinced or willing to do so, and this has notably been evident in the dilution of some of the more libertarian aspects of the free schools programme<sup>709</sup> and the scale of the re-organization of the NHS. While in theory both sides appear to share common ground in terms of 'localism' and devolution of services, many from the social democrat tradition of the Liberal Democrats have seemed to preferred to retain a more 'statist' and explicitly regulatory emphasis in relation to areas of core social policy provision, principally for fear of creating a potential 'postcode lottery' in the process, and claiming that *'the problem with localism is that the government is applying localist principles to issues in which there are also universal rights'*<sup>710</sup>, which thus potentially erodes such rights and levels of public services as a consequence. This has been a broader criticism of the overall Big Society socio-political agenda since 2010.

It could therefore be argued that the Conservative social policy agenda has been blunted as a result, which some of the party's politicians appear to have welcomed while others have not, and such developments and apparent dilution may explain comments made during the coalition's negotiations that *'Nick (Clegg) was doubtful about Conservative social policies'*<sup>711</sup>. However as the coalition has persisted beyond the halfway point of the scheduled five year Parliament, some grassroots elements of the Liberal Democrat Party have suggested in pragmatic terms that there remain ongoing areas of compatibility and dynamic policy movement between the parties in key areas of social policy, evident in comments from party activists such as:

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<sup>709</sup> Nick Clegg, speech in London on Free Schools, reported on BBC News website, *'Nick Clegg rules out running free schools for profit'*, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-14781392>

<sup>710</sup> Paula Keaveney, former leader of Liberal Democrat Group (Liverpool city council) and Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate in 2010 general election, interview with author, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2013.

<sup>711</sup> David Laws, *22 Days in May: The Birth of the Lib-Dem Conservative Coalition*, (Biteback, London, 2010), Diary entry, Monday 10th May 2010, p.138

*'I don't have a problem if the profit is ploughed back into the school like a social business..... (and) if we are liberals and believe in diversity, we ought to be supporting a range of schools'*<sup>712</sup>.

Whether further 'fusion' on such key social policy matters continues to significantly develop and filters back up the national party leadership to impact on coalition policy remains to be seen, but there do appear to be some areas of common socio-political ground that have been established between the coalition partners, notably in relation to a less centralised concept of the state that rejects the perceived micro-management of the previous Labour government, and which in social policy terms has entailed a combined focus on localism and a *'common shared instinct which is about giving people the chance to not be told every minute of every day what needs to happen'*<sup>713</sup>. This shared rejection of a 'one-size-fits all' range of social policies imposed from a bureaucratic and centralised state indicates a sense of common ground and would suggest the potential for an evolved and more pragmatic approach to social policy for a Conservative-led government, appearing to transcend the more prescriptive and ideological aspects of the 'strong state' evident during the Thatcher period of government during the 1980s, and towards a more liberal socio-political agenda in the process.

Social policy has therefore certainly seemed to take on a distinct and perhaps more libertarian shape and flavour as a result of the existence of a coalition government, and within this context a significant range of Conservative politicians<sup>714</sup> and political commentators have viewed such a development in a negative sense and have repeatedly called for an ending of the coalition and for a minority Conservative administration to be established as an alternative basis for governance, although this does not make the passage of 'purer' Conservative policy any more likely in practical terms. Such demands have stemmed from a belief that it was a specific lack of traditional 'Conservatism' that cost the party the necessary votes to secure a clear parliamentary majority at the 2010 general

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<sup>712</sup> Paula Keaveney, former leader of Liberal Democrat Group (Liverpool city council) and Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate in 2010 general election, interview with author, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2013.

<sup>713</sup> Ibid.

<sup>714</sup> BBC News website, *'Peter Bone on coalition ending for minority government'*, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-18739126>

election, leading to a growing frustration within some Conservative circles at what they perceive to be the lack of a clear ideological direction at the heart of government after 2010, too much policy compromise with the coalition partners and the erosion of the vitality and vigour of their party's specific socio-political agenda in the process. It has therefore been acknowledged that the Liberal Democrats have effectively shaped the nature of government policy-making in various ways<sup>715</sup> that many Conservatives disagree with, although in some high-profile social policy areas such as tuition fees and welfare benefits reform it has not been so apparent that they have diverted the Conservatives off their original course. On this basis it therefore appears to be the case that common ground has existed between the coalition partners in social policy matters, and that the Liberal Democrats have shaped this broad sphere of policy in some ways after 2010, although the precise extent of this influence has been a matter of significant political debate and has been variable from issue to issue.

### **Concluding Overview: New and changed Conservatism?**

Given such ongoing problems with perceptions about the Conservative Party's image and inherent socio-political agenda, it appears that since returning to national office in 2010 modern Conservatism has offered the rhetoric of change with regard to its social policy agenda, but has so far failed to convince the broader media and public opinion about the precise nature of such change, as well as the nature of its broad political direction, contemporary identity and specific values. By engaging in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats due to the vagaries of electoral fortune, the party has subsequently displayed statecraft-fuelled motives to achieve and maintain political office, while also provided some suggestion of the emergence of its own more 'liberal' values due to its new rhetorical emphasis and the very nature of its specific coalition partner. However whether such liberal influences have genuinely prevailed to shape a fundamental long-term change in social policy-making is a matter of some conjecture. In the period that has followed the coalition's formation, the Conservative-led government has appeared to make some gestures towards

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<sup>715</sup> Isabel Hardman, '*Nick Clegg is changing the way the government works*', The Spectator, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2012, <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2012/12/nick-clegg-is-changing-the-way-the-government-works/>



a more explicitly ideological and more focused emphasis in economic policy at least, motivated by a clear desire to tackle the national deficit alongside the need to restore its former reputation for financial prudence and fiscal conservatism that was damaged during the 1990s. In the context of addressing the national deficit, such an approach to economics may indeed produce enhanced electoral appeal in the long-term within some parts of the electorate, but whether it is alone sufficient to secure outright electoral success is a matter for debate, particularly given that such an austerity-driven economic approach has antagonised and provoked heightened opposition within the centre-left. In social policy terms the approach has diverged in a less focused and more ambivalent direction in practical terms at least, and can therefore be described as gradual, hazy and cautious in nature, at times seeking to 'nudge' public opinion in a preferred general direction that seeks wider approval for a more diverse dynamic within public service delivery, yet without necessarily delivering a definite vision and fundamental 'modernization' of the party's identity and image within this sphere. The liberal rhetoric and communitarian focus of the Cameron leadership has therefore not always delivered in practical terms, primarily due to the imposition of financial austerity, as mentioned in earlier parts of this conclusion. However its focus, albeit a vague one, on utopian visions of a much-vaunted 'Big Society' within a somewhat teleocratic and determinist outlook, has made its approach and agenda somewhat distinct from other modern periods of Conservative governance in terms of social policy-making.

Since 2010, there has certainly been evidence of compromise and retreat from original proposals in some areas of social policy, inflicted by a combination of ideological uncertainty, public criticism and Liberal Democrat scepticism, although some radical tenets have been maintained due to the determination of politicians such as Education Secretary Michael Gove in particular, whose free schools agenda appears to have taken on the dynamism and ethos of a 'permanent revolution' according to some observers<sup>716</sup>, and which he has continued to promote in a more radical guise in the run up to the 2015 general

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<sup>716</sup> Warwick Mansell, 'A Permanent Revolution', Global Voices in the UK, Phi Delta Kappan (Kappan Magazine), 1<sup>st</sup> May 2011

election<sup>717</sup>. Indeed the need to extensively revolutionize and restructure social policy has been demanded by the more radical thinkers, reformist groups and commentators from the Conservative perspective<sup>718</sup>, and such full-blown modernization of both social and political attitudes is the desired requirement for those that seek the outright 'de-toxification' of the Conservative Party's formerly negative and regressive image on social policy matters, aspiring to create a form of 'Popular Conservatism' in social terms in the process. The ultimate aspiration of this viewpoint is therefore the emergence of a genuinely distinct Conservative vision for the 21st century that focuses on improved compassion and socio-economic outcomes, enhanced levels of 'fairness' and social mobility combined with a distinct and more 'individualistic' version of social justice. This socio-political model is to be complemented by a streamlined and more efficient state structure infused with a more commercial ethos, yet crucially aligned with a heightened degree of communitarianism and such associated values<sup>719</sup>.

This fused model for policy-making therefore appears to entail the need for a reformulated version of Conservative 'ideology' for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and while this appears to represent change in theory, in practical policy terms it has struggled to come to fruition and appears to be an extremely ambitious and difficult project to fulfil. Such difficult challenges stem from the fact that it seeks to reject the extremes of neo-liberal marketisation while also distancing itself from the 'big government' of the state that was said to prevail both during the New Labour era as well as during the 'years of consensus' that dominated the post-war era until the mid-1970s. On the basis of evidence within this thesis there has clearly been some re-marketised rhetoric and practical policy gestures in

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<sup>717</sup> Andrew Grice, 'Exclusive: Revealed - Tory plan for firms to run schools for profit', The Independent, 10th January 2013,

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/exclusive-revealed--tory-plan-for-firms-to-run-schools-for-profit-8445066.html>

<sup>718</sup> Ryan Shorthouse, Director of Bright Blue, 'Conservative modernisation: it's time for version 2.0', Comment is Free, The Guardian, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2012/oct/06/conservative-modernisation-project-relaunch>

See also:

Ryan Shorthouse: 'We need a second wave of modernisation', Conservative Home website, July 31<sup>st</sup> 2012,

<http://conservativehome.blogs.com/platform/2012/07/ryan-shorthouse.html>

<sup>719</sup> See groups such as Bright Blue, a think-tank for Progressive Conservatism,

<http://brightblueonline.com/>

See also: 'Strong and Compassionate Conservatism',

<http://www.strongandcompassionate.com/>

the direction of a form of New Conservatism in the sphere of social policy, as the Conservatives have sought to reduce the extent of state monopoly in the provision of key public services. Although some specific policy initiatives have made an impact, this 'new' approach has generally struggled to reach sustained fulfilment in a coherent sense by the mid-term of the 2010 Parliament, and whether it ever achieves its bold aspirations is a matter of serious conjecture due to ongoing conditions imposed by the austerity agenda. There has been some clear evidence of practical policy in action in the form of innovations such as free schools and the reformist aspirations for a post-bureaucratic NHS, and aligned with the theoretical framework of The Big Society, such measures have collectively attempted to re-position and re-mould the party's message on key social policy matters.

However these 'liberating' measures of public service reform have evidently failed to convince much of the British public in terms of their practical aims and principles, with the perception that such terms are merely a cloak for spending cuts being a common one<sup>720</sup>, despite this viewpoint being dismissed by advocates of the Big Society who claim that this specific concept of a revised and renewed approach to governance pre-dated *'the economic crisis of 2008 and the imposition of budget cuts and austerity, so it's obviously not purely about justifying cuts'*<sup>721</sup>. However as part of the overall process of adapting to survive and evolving in classic conservative style, while also specifically seeking to meet the pivotal challenge of embracing a revived socio-political image and agenda to capture the mood of 21<sup>st</sup> century British society, the Conservative Party appears to have been either unwilling or unable to support the full-blown evolution of such policy gestures with the necessary funding or practical support. This resistance to the scale of social policy renewal is possibly due to the party's shift in emphasis from full-blown policy and image modernisation to the more mundane reality of fiscal responsibility following the economic downturn from 2008 onwards. On the basis of the evidence within this thesis, in fundamentally attempting to address the long-term shifting social attitudes of the wider British public within the context of a prolonged economic recession, it can be argued that some elements of the Conservative Party and its more individualistic heritage and economic focus appear to be

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<sup>720</sup> See James Meikle, *'Big society' has no teeth, says Catholic archbishop*, The Observer, 17<sup>th</sup> April 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/17/catholic-archbishop-big-society-teeth>

<sup>721</sup> Jesse Norman, MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire, interview with author, 16th March 2012

de-aligned from the more communitarian and state-centred instincts of much of the British public, shaped to an extent by thirteen years of New Labour government. The modernising faction of the Conservative Party can therefore demand on this basis that further internal changes of attitude within the party are urgently required in order for it to be more in tune and synchronised with similar shifts in attitude across the wider British public, as at times since 1997 they clearly have not been, although attempts to 'nudge' the public mood since regaining national office in 2010 may hasten such a correlation on right-of-centre terms.

It is perhaps ultimately the case that the practical restraints of coalition government and the intermittent moderating presence of Liberal Democrats as junior partners since May 2010 has had a significant influence in hindering and blunting the likelihood of the re-emergence of a distinct and revived form of Conservative ideology in all of its vigour, and this may explain the more adaptable and pragmatic aspects of David Cameron's political focus since coming to power in 2010. At the same time, such circumstances may have provided Cameron and his inner-circle with the pretext for a more moderate and modernising socio-political agenda that they would have preferred to pursue anyhow, yet which still retains a softer tone than the 1980s model of Conservatism, in social policy at least. How different in an ideological sense or how more or less vigorous in policy terms a majority Conservative government would have been is a matter of debate, and whether the Cameron leadership would want to explicitly align with the party's ideological heritage of the 1980s (in both political and strategic terms), is open to question in terms of maintaining long-term electoral popularity. It can however be a convenient political tool for some Conservatives to blame the junior coalition partners for what has been viewed by some critics as an often bland and uninspiring policy agenda, and this has arguably bolstered the premise that in order to indicate a real and significant change within the Conservative Party's socio-political approach, the subsequent social policy reforms have needed to be significantly deep-rooted and more fundamentally radical in nature if they are to reflect contemporary social changes and result in a genuinely new approach to social policy in both theory and practice, and both critics and party modernisers<sup>722</sup> would claim this has been not been sufficiently the case.

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<sup>722</sup> See Ryan Shorthouse (ed.), *Tory modernisation 2.0: the future of the Conservative Party*, (Bright Blue, London, 2013), e-book:

While the rhetoric has at times been bold and suggested that real change is a central feature within the party's modern social policy agenda, the practical delivery has often significantly faltered. Although there is evidence that the political opposition has had to adapt and react to the Conservative social policy agenda, in office the party's attempts to fundamentally re-define the role of the state and streamline bureaucracy have met various obstacles and ultimately failed to convince some significant opinion-formers within the media and across society. Such stuttering developments arguably strike at the heart of the Conservative Party's fundamental and often problematic approach to responding and dealing with socio-political change and how best to manage it in line with Burkean gradualism, and this dynamic has been addressed with varying degrees of success across modern history. Such an apparently revised and refreshed social policy agenda has therefore struggled to flourish and deliver the necessary change in policy terms, and it may ultimately need to be put to the absolute test in a practical sense by the fulfilment of the first majority Conservative government for over twenty years<sup>723</sup>. Therefore in order for its revised approach to governance alongside its desired 'change' in terms of both ideology and policy be able to flourish to its maximum extent, party strategists and modernisers would therefore ultimately desire a more favourable parliamentary scenario in order for the wider public to accept and acknowledge the true nature of modern Conservatism and to observe its viability as a political project, and to what extent it really does aspire to empathise with wider British social attitudes and values.

However there is ultimately something of a challenging paradox in the likely achievement of such a scenario, as the Conservative Party's determined drive to tackle the national deficit after 2010 has led to the imposition of severe austerity measures throughout the first half of the 2010-15 government (and beyond), as the government attempts to re-balance what it believes to be an over-inflated state structure with a greater emphasis on private sector growth. However such a strategy has appeared to undermine

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<http://brightblue.org.uk/bbtory20.pdf>

<sup>723</sup> Tim Montgomerie, *'Making the case for a majority rather than another coalition'*, Conservative Home website, 15<sup>th</sup> October 2012, [http://conservativehome.blogs.com/majority\\_conservatism/2012/10/making-the-case-for-a-majority-rather-than-another-coalition.html](http://conservativehome.blogs.com/majority_conservatism/2012/10/making-the-case-for-a-majority-rather-than-another-coalition.html)

aspects of its revived social policy agenda in terms of the required funding and financial support, which in turn has created clear potential to alienate a significant number of voters that would make the prospect of a majority Conservative administration in the near future a more distant likelihood than ever<sup>724</sup>. In this sense, economic policy continues to fuse with social policy and in turn mould the specific socio-political consensus of the day, and the economic agenda has arguably taken precedence over social policy in terms of urgent political priorities since 2010, with negative implications for social policy in the process. One prominent political commentator has explicitly argued that this relentless focus on austerity has resulted in the further neglect of the Conservative Party's formerly innovative 'Big Society' social agenda, and that *'austerity has produced a Pavlovian dog reflex, and it's recreated the Thatcherite dog, and that's a real shame'*<sup>725</sup>, with a clear reversion to the party's fiscal conservative instincts as a consequence.

In this context, parallels can be made with the socio-economic trends and developments that occurred during the early phase of the Thatcher government in the 1980s, which also identified the primary need to address fundamental and deep-rooted economic issues on taking office. Besides such major financial issues fusing with the practical limitations of coalition government, at the heart of this approach to social policy reform there appear to be clear theoretical tensions between the Conservative-led government's rediscovered desire for altruistic, civic engagement alongside simultaneous preferences for competitive, profit-orientated public service provision amidst a 'reimagined' state, and it has been increasingly open to question as to whether these dimensions can effectively work together in harmony. It is therefore the case that if such a revised party image and renewed policy emphasis is perceived as being unclear, thin and artificial in nature and is coupled with an unpopular period of 'statecraft' amidst an aura of ideological haze and austerity, such a scenario will almost certainly entail future policy and electoral failure despite the 21<sup>st</sup> century Conservative leadership embracing a rhetorical emphasis on change and a revamped style and model of governance. Given that a Conservative-led

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<sup>724</sup> Tim Montgomerie, 'Only 12% of Tory members expect Cameron to win a majority at next election', Conservative Home website, 27<sup>th</sup> December 2012, <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2012/12/only-12-of-tory-members-expect-cameron-to-win-a-majority-at-next-election.html>

<sup>725</sup> Phillip Blond, Respublica think-tank, interview with author, 19th February 2013

administration is highly likely to continue to be at the forefront of British government and be exposed to the harsh realities of electoral politics and media scrutiny up to 2015 at least, this perceived failure of modern Conservatism to sufficiently 'change' in relation to its ideological renewal, revised party image and practical social policy delivery has some potentially severe implications for the party's fortunes. Despite such determined attempts to restore the foundations of a bygone electoral hegemony, the failure of the Conservative Party to convincingly re-brand and impose a coherent social policy agenda since 2010 has created the potential for a phase of dysfunctional statecraft which could lead to further long-term electoral damage and another sustained exile from national office<sup>726</sup>. This is a somewhat ironic development given its energetic and concerted attempts at significant social policy re-formulation and renewal since the party's cataclysmic electoral nadir of 1997, and such a scenario has the potential to trigger further internal disputes in relation to what extent the party has appropriately revised its broader public image, alongside the precise nature of its policy reforms and pace of modernisation in recent years, particularly as to whether it has been too extensive or insufficient overall.

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<sup>726</sup> See Paul Goodman, Executive Editor of Conservative Home website, *'It's two years away, but the 2015 election is already lost'*, The Daily Telegraph, 29<sup>th</sup> December 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/9770710/Its-two-years-away-but-the-2015-election-is-already-lost.html>

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